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E d i t o r i a l

BY ROBERT BLOCH

ACCORDING to the Old Testament, God created the world in six days and six nights, and on the seventh day He rested.

Luckily, all this happened some while back. If He tried the same stunt now, He'd get in trouble with the unions.

You just don't mess around with the concept of the 40-hour week today, and even at time-and-a-half or double-time, it isn't considered good policy to work quite that fast. Besides, there are all kinds of specialized jobs which are protected and can't be infringed upon by outsiders. Now I'm not saying that the unions are unreasonable; chances are, they'd be perfectly willing to get together with God and even sit down at a conference table to work things out if they could spare the time. It might be that they would come up with a fair and equitable deal, with due allowance for stand-by crews and

a little featherbedding and fringe benefits, to say nothing of paid vacations, automatic wage-increases and coffee-breaks.

Management would have to get in on the act, too; after all, the price of equipment and raw materials must be considered, and investment capital is entitled to a percentage of the profits.

All things considered, I believe it's safe to assume that God would run into definite problems if He planned on duplicating that world-making routine today. And certainly, those problems confront anyone else who plans on making a world, or even destroying one.

Now a writer, of course, has an easier time of it.

Give any writer of science fiction a piece of paper and a pencil and he can create or obliterate a world, or even an entire universe, in fifteen minutes, flat. And sometimes it *is* pretty flat.

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But the results often enchant a fair number of readers, who thereupon speculate as to why the same effect cannot regularly be achieved in other media, such as motion pictures and television.

I can only refer such readers to my remarks about the problems which God would encounter. I must also remind them that the average motion picture or television producer isn't God (no matter what *he* thinks) and that costs have risen appreciably for mere mortals since the good old days back in Sodom and Gomorrah. In terms of pure economics then, the worst that could befall a solid citizen like Lot was to look back and see his wife turn into a pillar of salt. Nowadays, every time I look back, I see my wife turn into a super-market and come out with a bill for \$40 worth of groceries.

So let's face it; science fiction movies are usually too expensive to produce nowadays. *Good* science fiction movies, that is.

I'VE already expressed myself in the past upon the *bad* science fiction movies, which are largely the reflection of the intellectual and aesthetic limitations of their producers. But since coming to the cinema citadel, I've been made increasingly aware of the fact that there *are* men out here who would like

to put quality science fiction on the screen—and they are stymied by economics.

It's largely a matter of space and time.

Once again, here are matters which science fiction *writers* handle easily—all they need is the same standard equipment, paper and pencil, to cope with space and time in the abstract.

Yet in the concrete—the concrete streets and concrete soundstages of the studios—space and time present insuperable obstacles to achievement. Both cost too much money.

Back in the Twenties it was possible for Fritz Lang to produce his *Metropolis* at relatively small expense; a Germany suffering from postwar depression offered government-subsidized space and production facilities and hordes of extras at little cost. A similar situation existed in England during the Thirties when *Things To Come* was filmed.

But since the coming of the Four Horsemen (War, Inflation, Unionization and Fixed Overhead) such opportunities no longer exist.

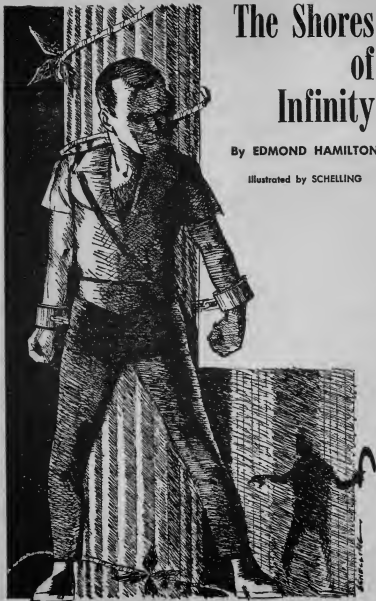
It is still possible to make "spectacles" for considerably less money in Europe—but, significantly, almost all of these epics deal with war or a military background. There's no trick to hiring a lot of extras and outfit-

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The Shores of Infinity

By EDMOND HAMILTON

Illustrated by SCHELLING



At the far reaches of the Galaxy, the H'Harn writhed for vengeance. John Gordon, serving Lianna of Fomalhaut, searches for their secret in Ed Hamilton's new novelet of the Star Kings.

OUTSIDE, in the light of the flying moons, the old kings of Fomalhaut stood and dreamed in stone. All the way from the far-flung distant lights of city up to this massive palace ran the great avenue of statues, eleven dynasties and more than a hundred kings, towering up much larger than life so that they would dwarf and awe the envoys who came this way. No one came now, all was silent, but in the changing light of the racing moons, the stone faces seemed to change, to smile, to glare, to brood.

In the vast darkness of the throne-hall, looking out at that mighty avenue, John Gordon felt small and insignificant. From the shadowed walls other pictured faces looked down at him, the faces of other great ones in the long history of Fomalhaut Kingdom, and it seemed to him that there was contempt in their glance.

Man of Earth, man of the old

20th Century that is now two hundred thousand years ago . . . what do you here out of your own place and time?

What, indeed? And a sense of terrifying alienage took Gordon by the throat, and he seemed reeling, falling out of everything, a lost soul wandering whimpering through the parsecs and the ages.

He fought that feeling, as he had had to fight it before. He was still John Gordon, man of 20th Century New York, even though he stood here sextillions of miles and millennia of years away from all that. He was himself, even though he had twice spanned the nightmare gulfs of space and time.

The first time, it had been his mind only, drawn across the abyss and for a while inhabiting the body of another man, before finally returning to his own body and place. The second time, this time, he had been drawn *physically* into this far-future universe of the star kingdoms.

And why had he done it? Why had he risked dissolution and death, and let his body's ultimate particles be drawn across the deeps of time to be reassembled in this far future day? He had thought it was for the woman with whom he had fallen in love when, in the body of Zarth Arn, a son of star kings, he had come to this age before. But now she found him a stranger, and to Gordon she seemed unattainable, and why had he done it, why, why, why . . .

Sweat was on his forehead and his whole body was trembling as he stood there in the shadows of the mighty hall. He started violently as he heard a sibilant voice, a voice that was as alien as everything else around him.

"It is strange, Gordon, that you were not afraid when there was great peril, but tremble now."

Korkhann was so vague in the shadows that he might have been human. Then his feathers rustled and his beaked face and wise eyes pushed forward into a bar of the shifting moonlight.

"I've asked you before," Gordon said, "not to read my mind."

"You do not know much about telepathic powers," Korkhann said mildly. "I have not violated your mental privacy. But I cannot help receiving your emotions." After a moment he added, "I am to bring you to the Council . . . Lianna sent me."

Gordon's resentment boiled up in him. "What use has the Council, or Lianna, for me? What do I know of things here? I'm a primitive, remember?"

"In some ways," said Korkhann, "you are. Lianna is a woman but she is also a reigning princess, and you must remember that your relation is as difficult for her as for you."

"Oh, hell," said Gordon. "Now I get advice for the lovelorn, from a . . . a . . ."

"From an overgrown mynah bird." Korkhann picked up the thought that Gordon had not uttered. "I assume that is some creature of your own world. Well. The advice is still good."

"I'm sorry," said Gordon, and meant it. He hadn't quite got used to unhumans yet but he and Korkhann had been through a nasty time together, and Korkhann was the one who had pulled them through at the end of it. He said, "I'll come."

THEY left the vast, shadowy hall and went along spacious corridors. They met almost no one, it was late at night, but Gordon had a feeling that there was tension in the silence that enveloped the palace, a brooding sense of danger. He knew that that was all in his own mind, the danger was not here, it was out there in the Marches of Outer Space, the wild frontier of the

galaxy. Yet the fact that the Council of the Kingdom of Fomalhaut was meeting this late, only hours after their cruiser had brought Lianna and Korkhann and himself to the throne-world, was evidence enough of how gravely that danger was regarded.

In the small, panelled room they came to, four faces looked up at Gordon with expressions between irritation and hostility. Korkhann was the only non-human of the Council, and Lianna, at the head of the little table, nodded to Gordon and spoke the names of the four men.

"Is this necessary?" asked the youngest of the four, a middle-aged man with burly brows. He added bluntly, "We've heard of your attachment to this Earthman, Highness, but I fail to see why . . ."

"I didn't ask to be here," Gordon said stiffly. "I . . ."

Lianna's blue eyes flashed toward him, and she cut in quickly, "It is necessary, Abro. Sit down, John Gordon."

He sat down at the far end of the table, and bristled inwardly, until Korkhann whispered, "Must you be so damned fighty?" and that coming from a bird-thing with wise yellow eyes startled Gordon into a brief smile. He relaxed a little.

The man called Abro spoke and in so doing, ignored Gordon in a

way that was a studied insult.

"It stands thus: The attempt that Narath Teyn made against you, his daring to use force against the sovereign of Fomalhaut, shows that he's dangerous. I say, hit him. Send a squadron of heavy cruisers to Teyn to teach him and his Gernns a lesson."

Inwardly, Gordon agreed, having still a vivid memory of how narrow a squeak had saved them from destruction at Teyn. But Lianna shook her pale-golden head slowly.

"My cousin Narath is not the danger. He's long conspired to replace me, but with only his wild, barbaric non-humans for allies, he could do nothing. But now . . . he has as allies at least some of the Counts of the Marches of Outer Space."

"Hit the Marches, then," said Abro harshly.

Gordon began to like this blunt, tough character who had given him such a hostile greeting. But Korkhann spoke, in his hesitant, whistling voice.

"There is something hidden," he said. "Some veiled, unknown forces are working from behind the Counts and Narath Teyn. One such was at Teyn and it was he who nearly destroyed us, but who or what he was, we could not tell. . . ."

Gordon perfectly remembered that cowed, unidentifiable figure

who had come to Teyn with the Count Cyn Cryver, and whose hammer of mental force had shattered them with its inconceivable power.

And so did Lianna remember, for he saw the slight pallor that came into her face.

"Use force against the Counts and we'll find out who or what is behind them," said one of the other councillors. "Abro is right."

"I think you are forgetting something," said Lianna. "The Counts are allies of the Empire."

"So are we allies of the Empire, and better and more dependable allies!" said Abro.

Lianna nodded. "I agree. But all the same, we can't go into the Marches without first taking the matter up with Throon."

THEY didn't like it, Gordon saw that. Like most of the men of the smaller star-kingdoms they had an inordinate pride, and asking anyone's permission went against the grain. But all the same, the Empire was the Empire, the greatest single power in the galaxy, ruling an inconceivable vastness of suns and worlds and people from the royal world that circled the mighty sun Canopus.

She had silenced them, for the moment. She added, "I'm sending Korkhann to take it up with them. And with him will go John Gordon."

Gordon's heart gave a great beat of excitement. To Throon! He would see it again . . .

An angry protest had already formed on Abro's lips, but it was Hastus Nor, oldest of the councillors, who voiced the objection. He looked down the table at Gordon and then he turned to Lianna.

He said, "It is no concern of ours if you have favorites, Highness. But it is our concern if you let them meddle in statecraft. No."

Lianna sprang up, her eyes blazing. The old man did not flinch from her anger. But before she could speak, Korkhann interrupted so smoothly and swiftly that it hardly seemed like an interruption at all.

"With your permission, Highness, I would like to answer that," he said. He looked around the hostile quartet of faces. "You all know, I think, that I have certain powers and that I have not often been wrong in a matter of fact."

"Get to it, Korkhann," growled the old councillor.

"Very well," said Korkhann. His wing unfolded and his little clawed hand rested on Gordon's shoulder. "I will say this, as a fact. No one . . . I say, *no one*, in the whole galaxy, would have as much influence in the councils of the Empire as this Earthman, John Gordon."

Gordon looked up at him, startled. "So you *have* been mind-reading?" he muttered. "Or did she tell you . . ."

Korkhann ignored him, and looked steadily around the faces. On them, hostility faded into puzzlement.

"But why . . . how?" demanded Abro.

Korkhann made the odd shrugging movement that made his feathers ruffle as in a wind.

"I have given you the fact. I will not explain."

They stared, frowning and curious, at Gordon, until old Hastus Nor finally rumbled, "If Korkhann says it, it must be so, even though . . ." He stopped, then went on decisively. "Let the man Gordon go."

Gordon spoke softly for the first time at that table. "Has anyone asked me where I *want* to go?"

He was mad clear through at being treated like a pawn, being argued over and challenged and defended, and he would have gone on to say so but Lianna spoke decisively.

"The council is ended, gentlemen."

They went out with no more said, and when they had gone, Lianna came toward Gordon.

"Why did you say that?" she asked. "You want to go."

"Why should I?"

"Don't lie," she said. "I saw

the eagerness in your face when it was suggested that you go to Throon."

She looked up at him and he saw the pain and doubt in her clear eyes.

"For a little while, after death had just passed us by at Teyn, I thought we had come closer," she said. "I thought it would be as it had been before with us. But I was wrong about you. It's not me you care about."

"That," said Gordon angrily, "is a fine thing to say to a man who risked his life to get here to you."

"Did you risk it to reach *me*, John Gordon? Was it me you remembered and longed for, back in that distant age of yours, or was it the adventure, the star-ships, all that our age has that yours had not, that you really longed to return to?"

There was just enough truth in the accusation to take the anger out of Gordon, and the moment of half-guilt he felt must have shown on his face, for Lianna, looking up at him, smiled a white and bitter smile.

"I thought so," she said, and turned away. "Go to Throon, then, and be damned."

2

ALL the way to Canopus, Gordon spent his waking time in the bridge of the fast scout.

Through the windows that were not really windows, he watched the star-groups rise up and change and fall behind. After the arid years on little Earth, he could not get enough of stars.

The titanic jumble of suns that was Hercules Cluster, the seat of power of those mighty Barons who looked on star-kings as merely equals, dropped past them to the west. The vast mass of faintly glowing drift that was known as the Deneb Shoals, they skirted. They plunged on and now they were passing through the space where, that other time, the space-fleets of the Empire and its allies had fought out their final Armageddon with the League of the Dark Worlds.

Gordon looked and dreamed. Far, far off southward lay the sprawling blotch of deeper darkness that was the Cloud, from which the armadas of the Dark Worlds had poured in their prideful menace. He remembered Thalarna and he remembered Shorr Kan, the master of the League, and how he had surrendered to defeat.

"You think too much of past things, and not enough of the present ones," said Korkhann, watching him shrewdly.

Gordon smiled. "If you know as much about me as I think you know, can you blame me? I was an impostor, I hardly knew what I was doing in that battle, but

I was *there*, and who could forget that?"

"Power is a heady wine," said Korkhann. "You had it once, the power of a universe in your hand. Do you long for it again?"

"No," said Gordon, startled by this echo of Lianna's accusation. "I was scared to death of it when I had it."

"Were you, John Gordon?"

Before Gordon could frame an irritated answer to that, Korkhann had gone away from the bridge.

His irritation faded and was forgotten as, in the time that followed, the heart-worlds of the mighty Mid-Galactic Empire brightened far ahead.

The stunning blue-white flare of Canopus was arrogant in its hugeness and intensity. And as the scout rushed on, there came into view the planets that circled that truly royal sun. Gordon's eyes clung to one of those planets, a gray, cloud-wrapped sphere. Throon . . .

He was remembering how he had first seen it, mazed and bewildered by this future universe, playing a part for which he had no preparation, a pawn in the hands of cosmic political powers whose purposes he could not dream.

Was he anything more than that right now? Wasn't he brought here to Throon so that Korkhann might exploit his sup-

posed influence with Jhal Arn, sovereign of the Empire? Yes, he thought, it's true. But it's not just for Romalhaut policies, it's for Lianna and against whatever mysterious, menacing thing was hatching out in the Marches that threatened her most immediately.

The planet rose up to meet him, its gray-green bulk immense, the sprawling continents starred with glittering metropoli that flared in the white sunlight. Then a mighty ocean and then, far ahead, what his eyes leaped to meet, the dazzling radiance that almost blinded the gaze, the Glass Mountains of smooth silicates flinging back the sunset light in shaking spears and fans and banners of glory. They went over that radiance, through it, and ahead of them there loomed the cluster of fairy-like glass towers that was the greatest capital in the galaxy.

Over its starport, the traffic was of tremendous volume. Gordon had forgotten how many ships came and went to this center of the Empire. Clocked smoothly in by the director-computers, the bulky arrogant liners from Deneb and Aldebaran and Sol came down to the inport like a parade of giants, while the smaller craft poured like a cataract of shining midges. But their own craft, being official, skirted all this and descended toward

the naval port, where the giant warships of the Empire loomed like dark thunderclouds above their docks.

AN hour later, they stood in the huge building that was the seat of a dynasty and the administrative center of the Empire.

Zarth Arn came to meet them, a tall figure, his dark face breaking into a smile and then becoming serious as he took Gordon's hand.

"I could wish your return to Throon had been on another occasion than this," he said. And he said, to Korkhann, "Yes, my brother knows why you have come. You're not the first on this errand."

Korkhann asked quickly, "The others are worried about the Marches, Highness?"

Zarth Arn nodded. "They are. But that's to be talked of later . . . to hell with diplomacy, Gordon and I have some drinking to do!" He led Gordon to a smoothly gliding motowalk. It carried them on into another hall, a vast chamber whose glass walls were adorned with flattened reliefs of dark stars, burned-out cindery suns, ebon cosmic drift, an overpowering impression of gloom and majesty. Gordon remembered this somber magnificence, and he remembered also the equally splendid hall beyond it that

seemed encompassed by the glow of a flaming nebula. The motor-walk bore them upward on a smooth slant.

Everywhere, courtiers and chamberlains bowed deeply to Zarth Arn. It seemed to Gordon that they looked a little askance at him, walking familiarly with the prince of the Empire.

"Does it seem strange to you?" he asked Zarth Arn. "To walk with me, knowing that once we inhabited each other's bodies?"

Zarth Arn smiled. "Not to me. You must remember that I crossed time many times before, and dwelt in many other bodies on those occasions, though all that is over now. But I suspect it is very strange indeed, to you."

They came to Zarth Arn's chambers, that Gordon so well remembered, high-ceilinged and austere white except for their silken hangings. The racks of thought-spools still stood at one side of the room. He went to the tall open windows and out onto the balcony that was like a small terrace jutting from the side of the huge, oblong palace. He looked again across Throon City.

It might have been that other time, he thought. For Canopus was setting, flinging a long, level radiance across the fairy-like towers of the metropolis, and the heaving green ocean, and the Glass Mountains that now were a rampart of dazzling glory.

Gordon stared bemused, until Zarth Arn's voice woke him from the spell.

"Do you find it the same Gordon?" he asked, handing him a tall glass of the brown liquor called *sagua*.

"Not quite," muttered Gordon.

Zarth Arn understood. "Liana was here that other time, wasn't she? I didn't mean to ask yet, but now . . . tell me, what of you two?"

"We haven't quite quarrelled," Gordon answered. "But . . . she seems to think it wasn't for her I came, but for . . . this."

And his gesture took in the whole vista of the magnificence of the great city, the flashing radiance of the mountains, the majesty of the star-ships rising from the distant starport.

THEY were interrupted by the opening of the door. The man who entered was tall and stalwart, dressed in black with a small blazing insignia on his chest. His eyes were level and searching as he came toward Gordon.

Gordon knew him. Jhal Arn, the elder brother of Zarth Arn, and the sovereign of the Mid-Galactic Empire.

"It is strange," said Jhal Arn. "You know me, of course, from that other time. But I see you . . . the physical you . . . for the first time."

He held out his hand. "Zarth has told me that this was the gesture of greeting in your time. You are welcome in Throon, John Gordon. You are very welcome."

The words were quiet and without emphasis, but the handgrip was strong.

"But more of this later," said Jhal Arn. "You've brought a problem to Throon. And not you alone . . . we have important visitors from some of the Empire's strongest allies, and they too are troubled."

He went over and looked thoughtfully out at the city, whose lights were coming on as the sunset faded into dusk. Two moons shone out in the twilit sky, one of them warm golden and the other one a ghostly silver in hue.

"A whisper has gone through the galaxy," said Jhal Arn. "A murmur, a breath, a sourceless rumor. And it says that in the Marches of Outer Space there is a mystery and a danger. Nothing more than that. But the very vagueness of it has disturbed some who are high in the star-kingdoms, while others scoff at it, as mere fancy."

"It wasn't fancy that we encountered at Teyn," said Gordon. "Korkhann can tell you . . ."

"Korkhann has already told me," nodded Jhal Arn. "I sent for him, straight after you two arrived. And . . . I don't like what I heard."

He shook his head. "Later on, tonight, a decision will have to be taken. It is one that could shatter the political fabric of the galaxy. And yet we must make it, knowing so little. . . ." He broke off, and turned to leave, and at the door turned round and gave Gordon a crooked smile. "You sat in my place once, for a little while, John Gordon. I tell you that it is still a painful place."

When he had left, Zarth Arn said, "I'll take you to the suite assigned you and Korkhann. I saw that it was close to this one . . . we have much to talk about."

He parted from Gordon at the door of the suite. Gordon went in, and was surprised by the luxury of the big room he entered. By comparison, Zarth Arn's was spartan. But Zarth Arn had always been more of the austere scholar-scientist than anything else.

He noticed the back of a feathered head above the back of a metal chair, and saw that Korkhann sat by the open window looking out at the flashing panorama of lights, the brilliant lights of Throon City and the distant lights of great star-liners coming down across the star-decked sky.

Gordon walked toward the window and around the chair, saying, "I don't like what I've been hearing, Korkhann. I . . ."

Then Gordon stopped, and suddenly shouted.

"Korkhann!"

THE feathered one sat in unnatural immobility. And his face, the beaked face and wise yellow eyes that Gordon had first come to tolerate and then to like, was strangely stony. The eyes were as opaque as cold yellow jewels, and they had not the faintest flicker of expression in them.

Gordon gripped him with his hands, feeling the astonishing slightness and fragility of the body beneath the feathers.

"Korkhann, what's happened to you? Wake up . . ."

After a moment, there was something in the eyes . . . a passing ripple of awareness. And of agony. A damned soul looking out for a split-second from a place of everlasting punishment might have such an expression.

Sweat stood on Gordon's forehead. He continued to shake Korkhann, to call his name. The agony reappeared in the eyes, it was as though there was a mighty straining of the mind behind those eyes, and then it was as though something snapped and Korkhann huddled sick and shaking, his wings quivering wildly. Inarticulate whistling sounds came from his throat.

"What was it?" cried Gordon.

It was a minute before Kor-

khann could look up at him, and now his eyes were wild.

"Something that I, and you, have experienced before. But worse. You remember the Cowled One at Narath Teyn, and how with his mental power he hammered us and sought to grip our minds?"

A coldness came upon Gordon. He remembered only too well the mystery-wrapped shape whose face and form none of them had seen, the enigmatic ally of Cyn Cryver and others of the Counts of the Marches, whom even the Gerrns had dreaded.

"Yes," whispered Korkhann. "Whatever they are, one of them is here. Here, I think, in this palace."

3

THE imperial palace of Throon throbbed and glittered in the night. Out of hundreds of windows poured soft light and drifting music and the hum of many voices. The arrival of dignitaries of other star-kingdoms was occasion for a state ball, and in the great halls a brilliant throng feasted and drank. Nor was that throng all human. Scale and hide and feather brushed against silken garments. Faces humanoid but not human, slanted eyes, slitted and saucer-like and pupilless eyes, gleamed in the light. Gargoyle shapes walked the dark

gardens in which glowed great plantings of the luminous flowers of Achernar.

As though in grim reminder that the Empire was not all a matter of pleasure-making, the music and hum of voices were drowned by a vast, thunderous bellowing as a full score of warships went up into the starry sky. The smaller scouts and phantoms had already screamed heavenward and now the great battle-cruisers lifted, dark bulks against the constellations, outbound toward the Pleiades and the big fleet-bases there.

Gordon had seen little of the festive part of the palace. He had walked with Zarth Arn behind Jhal Arn as the sovereign made an appearance there, and then they had come up here to the private chambers of Jhal Arn.

He had noted the curious gaze that the throng below had directed at himself. They were wondering, he knew, why an untitled Earthman should accompany an emperor.

He said now, "I feel I should have stayed with Korkhann. He was pretty badly shaken."

"My own guards are watching over him," said Jhal Arn. "He'll be here soon for the meeting. And there's someone else I've sent for, whom I think you'll remember, Gordon."

Presently a man entered the chambers. He wore the uniform

of a captain in the imperial space-fleet, and he was a big, burly man with bristling black hair and a craggy, copper-colored face. At sight of him, Gordon leaped to his feet.

"Hull Burrel!"

The big officer looked at him puzzledly. "I can't remember that we've met. . . ."

Gordon sank back into his chair. Of course Hull didn't recognize him. To both his best friend and the woman he loved, he was a stranger now. He felt a bitterness at the impossible situation he had put himself in when he had come to this age in his own physical body.

"Captain Burrel," said Jhal Arn. "Do you remember that when the League of the Dark Worlds attacked the Empire, an attempted assassination had already stricken me down, so that my brother acted as ruling regent in that crisis?"

A glow came onto Hull Burrel's battered coppery face. "Am I likely to forget it, highness? It was Prince Zarth Arn we followed when we smashed the League, in that last battle off Deneb!"

Jhal Arn went on. "When Shorr Kan sent the armadas of the League to attack us, he broadcast a galaxy-wide propaganda message. I want you to see a tape of part of that."

As Zarth Arn touched a but-

ton beside his chair, against an opposite wall appeared a stereovision picture of lifelike vividness. The picture was of a man speaking.

Gordon tensed in his chair. The man was tall and broad-shouldered, his black hair clipped short, his eyes keen and flashing. His voice cut like a swordblade, and the whole impact of that ruthless, amoral, mocking personality came through even in this reproduction.

"Shorr Kan," whispered Gordon.

He was not likely to forget the dictator of the League, the utterly cynical, utterly capable leader with whom Gordon had struggled for the fate of kingdoms.

"Listen," said Jhal Arn.

And Gordon heard it again and seemed transported back to that terrible moment. Shorr Kan was saying, "The Empire's regent, Zarth Arn, is not really Zarth Arn at all . . . he is an *impostor* masquerading as Zarth Arn. Star-kings and Barons, do not follow this impostor to defeat and doom!"

THE stereovision scene vanished. Hull Burrel turned, looking puzzled, and said. "I remember that, higness. His accusation was so ridiculous that no one paid any attention to it."

"The accusation was true," Jhal Arn said flatly.

Hull Burrel looked at his sovereign with incredulity written large on his face. He started to speak, then thought better of it. He looked at Zarth Arn.

Zarth Arn smiled. "Yes. Shorr Kan spoke the truth. Few know, but in past years I used scientific means to exchange minds with men of other worlds and times. One such experiment was with the man beside you . . . John Gordon of Earth. It was Gordon, in my body, who was regent of the Empire at that moment of crisis. And Shorr Kan had found it out."

He touched a control again and said, "You'll remember that after the League fleet was smashed, the men of the Dark Worlds admitted defeat and asked for a truce. This was their telestereo message of surrender, which you've seen before."

Another scene flashed into existence against the wall, one that was etched forever in Gordon's memory. In a room of Shorr Kan's palace appeared a group of wild-looking men, and one of them spoke hoarsely.

"The Dark Worlds agree to surrender on your terms, Prince Zarth! Shorr Kan's tyranny is overthrown. When he refused to surrender, we rose in rebellion against him. I can prove that by letting you see him . . . he is dying."

The telestereo scene switched

abruptly to another room of the palace. Behind a desk sat Shorr Kan. Men around him had their weapons trained on him, and his face was marble-white as he clutched at a blackened wound in his side. His dulled eyes cleared for a moment and he grinned weakly.

"You win," he said. "Devil of a way to end up, isn't it? But I'm not complaining, I had one life and used it to the limit. You're the same way, at bottom." His voice trailed to a whisper. "Maybe I'm a throwback to your world, Gordon? Born out of my time? Maybe . . ."

And he sprawled forward across his desk and lay still, and one of the grim-faced men bent to examine him and then said, "He's dead. Better for the Dark Worlds if he'd never been born."

The reproduced scene snapped out. After a moment of stunned silence, Hull Burrel spoke in a voice that echoed his stupefaction.

"I remember that. I couldn't understand what he meant by addressing Prince Zarth as 'Gordon'. None of us could." He swung around until his dazed eyes stared into Gordon's face. "Then *you* were the one who was with me in that struggle? You . . . the one who defeated Shorr Kan?"

Zarth Arn nodded. "It's so."

Gordon drew a long breath,

and then he held out his hand and said, "Hello, Hull."

The Antarian . . . for Hull Burrel was a native of a world of Antares . . . continued to stare dumbly, then seized Gordon's hand and began to babble excitedly. He was cut short by the entrance of Korkhann.

Korkhann answered, to a question from Jhal Arn, "Yes, highness, I am quite recovered."

Gordon doubted that. The yellow eyes were haunted, and there was a fear in the beaked face he had not seen there before.

"The palace has been searched and no trace of this mysterious attacker has been found," Jhal Arn was saying. "Tell us exactly what happened."

KORKANN'S voice dropped to a whisper. "There's little I can tell. It was the same sensation of overwhelming mental impact that I felt at Teyn, but stronger, more irresistible. I could not fight it this time, not even for a second. I knew nothing, then, until Gordon's shouting and shaking of me brought me back to consciousness. But . . . I believe that while I was held in that grip, my mind was being examined, all my memories and knowledge ransacked, by a telepath compared to whom I am as a child."

Jhal Arn leaned forward. "Tell me, when this power has seized

you, has there been a sensation as of mental *cold*?"

Korkhann looked astonished. "How could you guess that, highness?"

Jhal Arn did not answer, but between him and his brother flashed a look that was grim and somber.

A chamberlain entered the room, announcing dignitaries whom Jhal Arn greeted with formal protocol. Gordon, hearing the names of some and recognizing others, felt a sharp wonder.

No less than three star-kings had come to this secret meeting . . . young Sath Shamar of Polaris, the aging King-Regent of Cassiopeia, and the dark, crafty-looking sovereign of the Kingdom of Cepheus. There were chancellors of two other kingdoms present, and also one of the mightiest of the powerful Hercules Barons, Jon Ollen. His domain stretched so far from the Cluster to the edge of the Marche that it was actually bigger than some of the smaller kingdoms.

He looked now like a worried man, his cadaverous face gloomy in expression. Gordon remembered his galactography well enough to realize that every realm represented here lay near the Marches of Outer Space.

Jhal Arn began without preamble. "You've all heard the rumors that certain of the Counts of the Marches are preparing

some mysterious and dangerous aggression. It threatens all of you but first it threatens Fomalhaut, which is why Korkhann and my friend John Gordon have come here."

Jhal Arn emphasized the word "friend", and the men who had ignored Gordon until this moment, glanced at him sharply.

Jhal Arn went on, "Tell them what happened at Teyn, Korkhann."

Korkhann told them, of how Narath Teyn had tried to seize Lianna and of how he had had as allies, not only at least some of the Counts of the Marches, but also the cowed stranger whose face and form no man had seen but whose terrible mental power they had felt.

When Korkhann finished, there was a silence. Then young Sath Shamar said troubledly, "Of mysterious allies, we have heard nothing. But lately the Counts have become high-handed with us at Polaris, and have threatened us with powers they say could destroy us."

The tight-faced ruler of Cepheus added nothing, but the old Regent of Cassiopeia nodded confirmation. "There is something in the Marches . . . never have the Counts been so insolent with us."

Korkhann looked at the Baron and said softly, "You have something more than this, Jon Ollen?"

It seems to me that you are withholding something from us."

Jon Ollen's cadaverous face flushed dull red with anger and he exclaimed, "I will not have my mind read, telepath!"

"And how," asked Korkhann deprecatingly, "could I do that when you have kept a guard upon your thoughts since you entered this chamber?"

Jon Ollen said sullenly, "I don't want to hunt for trouble. My Barony is close up against the Marches, closer than any of your domains. If there is danger, I am most vulnerable to it."

JHAL Arn's voice rang decisively. "You are an ally of the Empire. If danger attacks you, we come in with you at once. If you know anything, say it."

Jon Ollen looked indecisive, worried, troubled. It was a minute before he spoke.

"I know but little, really. But . . . inside the Marches, not far from our frontier, is a world known as Aar. And mysterious things have happened that seem to focus on that world."

"What kind of things?"

"A merchant-ship returned into my Barony from the Marches, travelling on an insane course. Our cruisers could not understand its behavior and ran it down and boarded it. Every man aboard it was raving mad. The automatic log-recorder

showed that it had touched last at Aar. Then another ship that passed near Aar sent off a distress-call that was suddenly smothered. And that ship never was heard of again."

"What else?"

Jon Ollen's face lengthened. "There came to my court the Count Cyn Cryver of the Marches. He said that certain scientific experiments had made Aar dangerous and suggested we order all ships to avoid it. But "suggested" is hardly the word . . . he *ordered* me to do this."

"It would seem," muttered Jhal Arn thoughtfully, "that Aar is at least one focal point of the mystery."

"We could send a squadron in there to find out quickly," said Zarth Arn.

"But what if there's nothing really there?" cried Jon Ollen. "The Counts would hold me responsible for the incursion. You must understand my position."

"We understand it," Jhal Arn assured him. And to his brother, "No, Zarth. The Baron is right on that . . . if there's nothing there we'd have angered the Counts by an invasion of their domain, to the point of starting a border war all through the Marches. We'll slip a small unmarked scout into the Marches, with a few men who can investigate the place. Captain Burrel, you can lead them."

Gordon spoke up for the first time in that meeting. "I will go with Hull. Look, I'm the only one except Korkhann, who's not fitted for this kind of mission, to have ever *seen* one of the Counts' cryptic allies. At Teyn, remember."

"Why am I not fitted for such a mission?" Korkhann demanded, his feathers seeming to ruffle up with anger.

"Because no one else is so well fitted to be Princess Lianna's chancellor, and she mustn't lose you," said Gordon soothingly.

"It's a risky thing," muttered Jon Ollen. "I beg of you one thing . . . if you are caught, please don't implicate me in this."

"Your concern for the safety of my friends is overpowering," said Jhal Arn acidly.

The Baron disregarded the satire. He got to his feet. "I shall return home at once. I don't want to be mixed in this affair too much. Your highnesses, gentlemen . . . good night."

When he had gone out, Sath Shamar uttered an oath. "It's what I'd have expected of him. In the battle with the Dark Worlds, when the other Barons gave the galaxy an example of space-fighting it can never forget, he held back until sure that Shorr Kan was defeated."

Jhal Arn nodded. "But the strategic position of his domain

makes him valuable as an ally, so we have to put up with his selfishness."

WHEN the star-kings and chancellors had left, Jhal Arn looked a little sadly at Gordon.

"I wish you were not set on going, my friend. Did you come back to us, only to risk your neck?"

Gordon saw Korkhann looking at him, and knew what was in his mind. He remembered Lianna's bitter farewell, her accusation that it was the danger and wild beauty of this wider universe that had drawn him back here, and not love for her. He stubbornly told himself it wasn't true.

"You have said yourself," he reminded Jhal Arn, "that this danger most threatens Fomalhaut. And whatever threatens Lianna is my affair."

He was not sure that Jhal Arn believed him, and he was quite sure that Korkhann did not believe him at all.

Three days later a very small ship lay ready at the naval starport of Throon. It was a phantom-scout, but all the insignia had been removed from it, and the small crew of it did not wear uniform. Neither did Hull Burrel, who was to captain it.

In the palace, before he left, Gordon had a final word from Zarth Arn.

"We hope you come back with information, John Gordon. But if you don't . . . then in thirty days three full Empire squadrons will head for that world of Aar."

Gordon was surprised, and a little appalled. "But that could lead to war in the Marches . . . your brother admitted it."

"There are worse things than a border war," Zarth Arn said somberly. "You must remember our history that you learned before. You remember Brenn Bir?"

The name rang in Gordon's memory. "Of course. Your remote ancestor, the founder of your dynasty . . . the leader who repelled that alien invasion from the Magellanic Clouds outside the galaxy."

"And who wrecked part of the galaxy in doing it," Zarth Arn nodded. "We still have his records, archives that the galaxy knows nothing about. And some details in the description you and Korkhann gave of the cowed stranger at Reyn, made us look into those archives."

Gordon felt a terrifying surmise, and it was verified by Zarth Arn's next words.

"The records of Brenn Bir describe the Magellanian aliens as having a mental power so terrific that no human or non-human could withstand it. Only by disrupting space and hurling them out of this dimension were those

invaders defeated. And now . . . it seems that after all these thousands of years, they are coming back again!"

4

THE Marches of Outer Space had been, originally, an area only vaguely delimited. Early galactographers had defined it as that part of the galaxy which lay between the eastern and southern kingdoms, and the edge of the island-universe. For when, in the 22nd Century, the three inventions of the faster-than-light sub-spectrum rays, the Mass Control, and the stasis-force that cradled men's bodies so they remained impervious to extreme speeds and accelerations . . . when these made interstellar travel possible and the human stock poured out from Earth to colonize the galaxy, it had been toward the bigger star-systems they had gone, not the rim. Millennia later, when distant systems had broken away from Earth government and formed independent kingdoms, hardy adventurers in those kingdoms had gone into the starry wilderness of the Marches, setting up small domains that often were limited to one star and world.

These Counts of the Marches, as they called themselves, had always been a tough, insolent breed. They owed allegiance to no

star-king, though they had a nominal alliance with the Empire which prevented the other kingdoms from invading their small realms. The place had long been a focus of intrigue, a refuge for outlawed men, an irritation on the body-politic of the galaxy. But each jealous star-king refused to let his rivals take over the Marches, and so the situation had perpetuated itself.

"And that," thought Gordon, "is too damned bad. If this anarchic star-jungle had been cleaned up, it wouldn't harbor such danger now."

The little phantom-scout ship was well inside the Marches, moving on a devious course. By interstellar standards, the phantom's speed was slow. Its defensive armament was almost nonexistent and its offensive weapons were nothing more than a few missiles. But it possessed a supreme advantage for such a stealthy mission as this one . . . the ability to disappear. That was why there were phantoms in the fleet of every kingdom.

"It'd be safer to dark-out," said Hull Burrel, frowning. "But then we'd be running blind ourselves, and I don't like doing that in this mess."

GORDON thought that if it was a mess, it was an impressive one. Scores of stars

burned like great emerald and ruby and diamond lamps in the dark gloom. The radar screen showed shoals of drift between these star-systems, and here and there the Marches were rifted by great darknesses, loops and lanes of cosmic dust.

He looked back the way whence they had come, at Hercules Cluster that blazed like bright moths swarming thick about a lamp, at the far dimmed spark of Canopus. He hoped they would live to go back there. He looked ahead again and his imagination leaped beyond the stars he could see, to those out on the Rim, the spiral, outlying arms of stars that fringed the wheeling galaxy, and beyond which there was nothing until the distant Magellanic Clouds.

"It's too far," he said to Hull. "Zarth Arn must be wrong, there can't really be Magellanians in the Marches. If they'd come they wouldn't have come as stealthily infiltrators, but in a great invasion."

Hull Burrel shook his head. "They came that way once before, so the histories say. And they got annihilated, when Brenn Bir used the Disruptor on them. They might try a different way, this time." The big Antarian captain added, "But I can't believe it, either. It was so long ago."

For a long time the little phan-

tom threaded its way into the Marches, skirting great areas of drift that flowed like rivers of stone through space, tacking and twisting its way around enormous, ashen dark-stars, swinging far wide of inhabited systems.

Finally there came a time when, peering at the viewer, Hull Burrel pointed out a small, bright orange star glittering far away.

"That's it. The sun of Aar."

Gordon looked. "And now?"

"Now we dark-out," grunted the Antarian. "And from here on it'll be cursed ticklish navigating."

He gave the order. An alarm rang through the ship. The big dark-out generators aft began droning loudly. At that moment, all the viewer-windows and radar-screens went dark and blank.

Gordon had been in phantoms before, and had expected the phenomenon. The generators had created an aura of powerful force around the little ship, which force slightly refracted every light-ray or radar-beam that struck it. The phantom had become completely invisible both to the eye and to radar, but by the same token those in it could see nothing outside. Navigation now must be by the special sub-spectrum radar by which the phantom could slowly feel a way forward.

In the time that followed,

Gordon thought that it was remarkably like a 20th Century submarine feeling its way through ocean depths. There was the same feeling of blindness and semi-helplessness, the same dread of collision, in this case with some bit of drift the straining radar might not catch, and the same half-hysterical desire to see sunlight again. And the ordeal went on and on, the sweat standing out in fine beads on Hull Burrel's forehead as he jockeyed the little ship closer toward the single planet of the orange star.

Finally, Hull gave an order and the little ship hung motionless. He turned his glistening face toward Gordon.

"We should be just above the surface of Aar, but that's all I can say I hope to God we don't come out of dark-out right over our enemies heads!"

Gordon shrugged. "Jon Ollen said there wasn't much on this world, that it was mostly wild."

"One thing I love is an optimist who has no direct responsibility," growled the Antarian. "All right. Dark-out off!"

The droning of generators died. Instantly there poured into the bridge through the viewer-screens, a flood of brilliant orange sunlight. They peered tensely out.

"I apologize, optimist," said Hull, "It couldn't be better."

The little ship hung level with the top foliage of a golden forest. The plants . . . Gordon could not think of them as trees although they were that big . . . were thirty to forty feet high, graceful clusters of dark-green stems whose branches bore masses of feathery golden-yellow leaves. As far as the eye could reach, there was nothing but the roof of the forest glittering in the light of the orange sun.

"Take her down fast," ordered Hull. "We could just be ranged by radar up here."

The phantom dropped through the masses of lacy gold and landed in a grave of clustered stems, upon soft ground covered with a copper-colored brush that bore black fruits.

Gordon, peering fascinated through the viewer, suddenly shouted. "Something!"

The Antarian jumped to his side. "What?"

"It's gone now," said Gordon. "Something small, almost invisible that darted away under the brush."

The other looked doubtful. "In the star-log, this world Aar is listed as uninhabited. An attempt was once made to colonize it but the colonists were driven away from it by dangerous conditions. This could be some formidable creature."

Gordon was doubtful. "It seemed too small."

"Nevertheless, we'd better have a look around before we go thrashing through these forests," the Antarian said decisively. He spoke to the crewman in the bridge. "You and I will go out, Varren. Full armor."

Gordon shook his head. "I'll go with Varren. One of us has to stay to complete the mission if something happens to the other . . . and the one who stays had better be the one who can navigate the ship back out of here."

WHEN Gordon and Varren stepped out of the ship they wore the suits that did double-duty as space-suits and defensive armor, complete with helmets. They carried guns.

Looking uncertainly around, Gordon began to feel a bit foolish. Nothing moved except the golden foliage high above, waving in the breeze. His helmet sound-pick-up brought no sound except the faint sounds of a forest.

"Where was this thing you saw?" asked Varren. His voice was very polite.

"Over this way," Gordon said. "I don't know . . . it could have been a leaf blowing. . . ."

He suddenly stopped, looking upward. Twelve feet above the ground, fastened solidly inside a crotch of one of the gold-trees, was a curious thing vaguely resembling a squirrel's summer-

nest. Except that this was no ragged thing of twigs and branches but a solid little box of cut wood, with a door in its side.

"It was going toward this place," said Gordon. "Look."

Varren looked. He looked up for a long time and then he remarked quietly that he would be damned.

"I'm climbing up there to take a look," said Gordon. "If it's what I *thought* I saw, it won't be too dangerous. If not . . . cover me."

The climb would not have been difficult if it had not been for the clumsy armor-suit. But he was sweating by the time he reached a crotch on which he could stand with his face level with the little tree-box.

Gently, Gordon pushed at the little door. A faint snapping told of a tiny catch breaking. He continued to push but it was difficult . . . something someone, was holding the little door on the inside.

Then the resistance gave way, and Gordon looked inside. At first he could see nothing but a purple gloom. But the hot orange sunlight pouring in through the little opened door revealed detail as his eyes adjusted.

Those who had been trying to hold the door against him now cowered terrifiedly at the far side of the little room. They were not much more than a foot high and

they were quite human in shape . . . a man and a woman, naked except for long gloves that he thought might be designed for the gathering of fruit from spiny plants.

The two were semi-transparent. Their bodies were as translucent as plastic.

They cowered, and Gordon stared, and then he heard the man speaking in a tiny voice. He could hardly hear, but it was not a language he knew.

After a long moment, Gordon slid back down to the ground. He pointed upward and said to Varren, "Take a look. Maybe you can understand their language."

"Their *what?*" said Varren. He looked at Gordon as though he doubted his sanity. Then he too climbed up.

IT was a long time before Varren came back down. When he did so, he looked sick.

"I talked with them," he said, and then repeated that as though he didn't quite believe it. "I *talked* with them. Oh, yes, I could understand them. You see, a few thousand years ago they were our own people."

Gordon looked at him incredulously. "Those creatures? But, but . . ."

"The colonists," said Varren. "The ones Captain Burrel read about in the log, that were driven away from here by dangerous

conditions. They didn't all go away. Some had already become victims of the danger . . . a chemical constituent in either the air or water here which, after a few generations, makes the human body evolve toward smallness."

Varren shook his head. "Poor little beggars. They couldn't tell me that but I could guess it from the few scraps of legend they did tell me. It's my guess that they mutated toward that semi-transparency as a camouflage defense against other creatures here."

Gordon shivered. There was beauty and wonder in the stars, but there was also horror.

"One thing I learned," Varren added. "They're terribly afraid of something out there in the west. I got that out of them, but no more."

When they went back into the ship, it was the last statement that interested Hull Burrel most.

"It checks," he said. "We've been making a sweep with sub-spectrum radar and it definitely showed large metal constructions several hundred miles to the west. On this world, that can only be the place we're hunting."

The Antarian thought for a little, then said decisively, "We'd never make that distance on foot. We'll have to wait until night and move the ship closer. If we hug the tree-tops, it might fool their radar."

Night on Aar was a heavy darkness, for this world had no moon. The phantom purred along over foliage glistening in the light of the stars, the scattered, lonesome stars of the Marches. Hull Burrel had the controls. Gordon stood quiet and watched through the viewer-window.

He thought he saw something, finally, something far ahead that glinted a dull reflection of the starlight. He started to speak, but Hull nodded.

"I caught it. We'll go down."

Gordon waited. Instead of going down at once, the little ship slipped onward, he supposed in search for a clear opening for descent into the forest.

He put his eye to the 'scope and peered. The glint of metal ahead sprang closer, and now he saw that the vague metal bulks were the buildings of a small city. There were domes, streets, walls. But there was not a single light there, and he could see that long ago the forest had come into this city's streets, and that its ways were choked with foliage. Without doubt, this would be a center of that tragically doomed colonist venture of many centuries ago.

But there were a few hooded lights beyond the city. He touched the scope-adjustment. He could see little, but it appeared that the old spaceport of the dead city had lain beyond it, a

dark flat surface that the forest had not yet been able to overwhelm.

Gordon could just descry the glint and shape of a few ships parked there. They were small Class Five starships, not much bigger than the phantom-scout. But there was one ship that had something queer about its outline.

He turned to say so to Hull Burrel, and as his eye left the scope, he saw that their craft was still gliding straight forward and had not begun to descend.

Gordon exclaimed, "What are you going further for? Do you figure to land at their front door?"

The Antarian did not answer. Gordon took hold of his arm. With a single sweep of his arm, Hull Burrel knocked him sprawling.

But in that moment, Gordon had seen Hull's face. It was stony, immobile, the eyes vacant of all emotion or perception. In a flash, Gordon knew.

He bunched himself and launched in a desperate spring at the Antarian. He knocked Hull away from the controls. But Hull hung onto the controls and dragged them before he was torn loose from them, and the phantom-scout suddenly stood on its head and then dived straight down through the foliage.

Gordon felt the metal wall slap his head, and then there was only darkness in which he fell and fell.

5

IN the darkness Gordon heard the voice of a dead man speaking.

"So that's what he looks like," said the voice. *"Well!"*

Whose voice was it? Gordon's pain-racked brain could not remember. Then how did he know that it was the voice of a dead man? He did not know how he knew, but he was sure that the man who spoke had died.

He must open his eyes and see who it was that spoke after death. He made an effort. And with the effort, the pain and the darkness rolled back across his mind more strongly than before, and he did not know anything.

When he finally awoke, he felt that it was much later. He also felt as though he had one of the biggest headaches in galactic history.

He did get his eyes open this time. He was in a small metal room with a solid metal door. There was a very tiny window with bars, and orange sunlight slanted through the bars.

Across the room from him, Hull Burrel sprawled on the dusty floor like one dead.

Gordon got to his feet. For a

while he stood perfectly still, hoping that he was not going to fall. Then he moved painfully across the room and knelt beside the Antarian.

Hull had a bruise on his chin, but no other perceptible injuries. Yet he lay like a man in deathly coma, his coppery face no longer like the side of a rough rock but gone all slack and sagging. His eyes were closed, but his mouth was open and spittle dribbled from it.

Gordon took him by the shoulders and said, "Hull," and of a sudden the living log turned into a maddened wildcat. Hull scrambled up, thrusting Gordon away, glaring at him as if he were an attacking wild-beast.

Gradually, Hull's eyes cleared. His muscles relaxed. He stared stupidly at Gordon and said, "What the devil's the matter with me?"

"You were slugged," said Gordon. "Not with a club, but with mental force. You were taken under control when we were nearing this place."

"This place?" Hull Burrel looked around, at the small, dusty metal room. "I don't remember," he muttered. "This looks like a prison."

Gordon nodded. "We're in the dead town of the old colonists. And you can't have a town without a jail."

His head ached. And more

than his head was hurt, his pride was bruised. He said, "Hull, I was a sort of hero back in that other time, when I lived in Zarth Arn's body . . . wasn't I?"

Hull stared. "You were. But what . . ."

"I was going to be a hero all over again," said Gordon bitterly. "To show I could be good as John Gordon, too. I've done fine, haven't I? Throon, Lianna . . . they'll be proud of me."

"You weren't leading this mission, I was," growled Hull Burrel. "It was I who fell on my face." He went to the little window and looked out at the street choked with golden foliage. He turned around, his brows knitted. "Mental force, you said. Then there must be one of those damned Magellanians here."

Gordon shrugged. "Who else could do a thing like that? We've been taken like children. They were sitting here waiting for us."

Hull suddenly shouted loudly. "Varren! Kano . . . Rann . . . are you here?"

There was no answer from the crewmen whose names he had shouted.

"Wherever they are, they're not here," muttered Hull. "And I wish I weren't. What next?"

"Next, we wait," said Gordon.

They waited for more than an hour. Then the door opened with-

out warning. Outside it stood a supercilious young man whose black uniform bore in silver the design of the Mace.

"The insigne of Cyn Cryver," said Gordon. "I might have guessed it."

"The Count Cyn Cryver will see you now," said the young man. "You can walk, or be dragged."

He nodded toward the two men who stood further outside the door and who carried stunners in their hands.

"All right, we'll walk," nodded Gordon. "I've enough headache already."

THEY walked out into the hot sunlight, and along a street that had once been wide. But time and weather had cracked its pavement and seeds had lodged to grow into the feathery golden trees, so that now it was a path in a street-forest that they followed.

The corroded metal fronts of buildings showed through the foliage, silent and dead. And Gordon glimpsed a statue, the figure of a man in space-dress, looking proudly down the way from the middle of the street. It would be, he thought, the star-captain who had led the ill-fated colonists here, in the long-ago centuries.

Look and be proud, star-captain. All that you wrought died

long ago, and the last descendants of your people are the furtive little hunted things in the forest which long mutational processes made of men and women. But be proud, star-captain, be happy, for your eyes are blind and cannot see . . .

They were taken into a building that looked like a municipal center. In a shadowy big hall, the Count Cyn Cryver lounged in a chair at a table, drinking a tawny-colored liquor from a tall goblet. He wore black, with his insigne arrogant on his breast, and he looked at Gordon with amused eyes.

"You kicked up quite a stir at Teyn but it seems we have you safe now," he said. He drank and put the goblet down. "A word of advice . . . never trust a coward. Like Jon Ollen, for instance."

A light burst upon Gordon. "Of course. That's why you were waiting for us. Jon Ollen is one of you."

Nothing else could explain it. The cadaverous Baron was a traitor, and it was a safe assumption that in Jon Ollen's ship had hidden that super-telepathic spy who had come to Throon.

Hull Burrel demanded harshly, "Where are my men?"

Cyn Cryver smiled. "We had no need of your men and ship and so they have been destroyed, as you will be destroyed when

we no longer have use for you."

Hull's first clenched. He looked as though he was about to jump toward the man sitting there, but the men with the stunners stepped forward.

"You will be examined later," Cyn Cryver said. "You are here now only because an old friend of yours wishes to see you. Tell their old friend that they are here, Bard."

One of the men went through a door at the rear of the hall. Gordon felt his skin crawling as he heard steps returning a moment later. He thought he knew what was coming.

He was wrong. It was not the cowed shape he feared that came into the hall. It was a man, broad-shouldered and tall, black-haired, tough-faced and keen-eyed, who stopped and looked at them smilingly.

"By God," said Hull Burrel. "*Shorr Kan!*"

"Oh, no," said Gordon. "Can't you see, it's some clever impersonation they've prepared. I saw Shorr Kan die, killed by his own men."

The man who looked like Shorr Kan laughed. "You *thought* you saw that, by stereo-vision. But you were deceived, Gordon. And if I do say so myself, it was a neat piece of deception, considering how little time we had in which to dream it up."

And it was the voice of Shorr

Kan, and also it was the voice of a dead man speaking in the darkness and saying, "So that's what he looks like!"

HE came closer and spoke earnestly, as one explaining something to a friend. "I was in the devil of a spot, thanks to you. Your damned Disruptor had shattered our fleet, and you were coming on toward the Dark Worlds, and my faithful subjects had got wind of it and were rioting in the streets. It was my neck, if I didn't think of something quick."

He grinned. "It took you all in, didn't it? I still had a few faithful officers, and when they sent out that stereo-vision message of surrender, they could show you poor old Shorr Kan, with a big fake wound in his side, putting on a death-scene I'm really proud of."

He burst into laughter. Stupefied, because he did not want to believe this and was beginning to do so, Gordon exclaimed, "Your body was found in the ruins of your palace!"

The other shrugged. "A body was found. The body of a dead rioter, who was my size. Of course there wasn't much to identify, for we fired the palace before we got the devil out of there, which little incendiary feat was blamed on my rioting subjects."

Gordon could no longer disbe-

lieve. He stared at Shorr Kan, at this man who had made himself master of the Dark Worlds and then, with their power, had almost shattered the star-kingsdoms.

"And you've been hiding here in the Marches ever since?" he cried.

"Let me say instead that I've been making an extended visit to certain of my old friends here, among whom I number first the Count Cyn Cryver," said Shorr Kan. "When I heard you were among us, the Gordon whom I had never seen physically but whom I had known only too well . . . well, I had to give you greeting for old time's sake."

The insolent brass of the man, his complete, mocking, light-hearted cynicism, had not changed.

Gordon said, between his teeth, "Why, I'm glad you saved your neck . . . even though it's a comedown from being master of the League of Dark Worlds, to hanging on the coat-tails of a Cyn Cryver . . . still, it's better than dying."

Shorr Kan laughed, in honest enjoyment. "Did you hear that, Cyn? Do you wonder I admired this chap? Here he is, at the end of his rope, and he tries to slap my face in a way that'll make bad blood between you and me!"

"Look at him, Hull," said Gordon mockingly. "Isn't he the one

to put a brave face on it? Lord of the Cloud, master of the Dark Worlds, almost the conqueror of the Empire itself . . . and now that he's reduced to skulking in the Marches and mixing up in filthy plots with ragtag one-world Counts, he still stays cheerful."

Shorr Kan grinned, but Cyn Cryver got up and came over, looking at Gordon with livid hatred.

"I've heard enough of this," he said. "You've seen your old enemy, Shorr, and that's that. Shackle them to those pillars, Bard. The Lord Susurr will come this evening and examine their minds for what they may contain of value, and then they can be tossed on a dung-heap."

"The Lord Susurr," repeated Gordon. "That would be one of your creepy little allies from Magellan, would it? Like the one we disappointed so sadly when we foxed you at Teyn?"

The rage left Cyn Cryver's face and he smiled in a deadly fashion as Gordon and Hull Burrel were shackled each to one of the ornamental, slender metal pillars that ran in two rows down the hall.

"Even for you," said Cyn Cryver, "I had still a spark of pity, considering what will happen to you soon. But now it is gone." He turned his back on Gordon and told the young captain,

"Guard them until the Lord Susurr comes. It will be some hours, for the Lord likes not the sunlight."

Shorr Kan said brightly, "Well, lads, I fear it's goodbye now. I can see you're going to meet your end like men of courage. I've always said, 'Die like a man . . . if you can't find any way of avoiding it'. And I *don't* think you can avoid it."

Hull Burrel answered him with a low, heartfelt cursing. Shorr Kan turned his back on them, and went out with Cyn Cryver.

Bard, the young captain, remained with two men. They took up their posts in the entrance of the building.

HULL kept on swearing, utilizing profanity from a dozen different worlds. "That devil-born fox! All these years the whole galaxy has thought him dead, and he bounces up here to laugh at us!"

"It's all history now," said Gordon. "Of more concern is what happens tonight, when the Lord Susurr who does not like sunlight comes to visit us."

Hull stopped swearing, and looked at him. "What's the creature going to do to us?"

"I imagine you could call it mental vivisection. I think it will take our minds and turn them inside out for every scrap of

information we might yield, and that it'll be only two mindless wrecks who are killed later."

Hull shivered. After a little silence he said, with an age-old hatred edging his voice, "Small wonder that Brenn Bir blasted the Magellanian invaders out of the universe, that other time."

No more was said, for there was nothing to say. Gordon stood against the pillar, with the shackles cutting his wrists behind him, and looked out through the open doorway as the long hours of afternoon crept away. The orange rays of sunlight that cut down through the interstices of the mint-yellow leaves, slanted and shifted. The breeze ruffled the leaves like autumn aspens on faraway, long ago Earth. Beyond the trees the metal star-captain stood stiff and valiant, staring forever across his ruined city.

The guards lounged and shuffled in the doorway, glancing in now and then at the two captives. But Gordon could hear no sound of any activity from the dead city around them. What was going on here at Aar? That it was a focus for the intrigue that had hatched between the Counts and Narath Teyn and the aliens from outside, he had no doubt. But it could not be a vital center of their plot, or the treacherous Jon Ollen would not have named this place, and baited them to come to it.

Had Jon Ollen been setting a trap, not just for Hull and Gordon and their little ship, but for the main squadrons of the Empire fleet? Jhal Arn had said that those squadrons would come here, if they did not return with information. If that was so, he and Hull had really messed it up. Lianna would be proud of him when she heard of it.

He thought of Lianna, and how they had parted at Fomalhaut. He did not want to think of her, and he made his mind go blank, and in a kind of stupor watched the rippling golden leaves outside. The time slipped slowly by.

The gold dulled. Gordon woke from his stupor to see that twilight had replaced the sunlight. And the guards in the doorway were now looking nervously along the street. As the dusk deepened, they stepped farther away from the doorway, out into the street, as though they were doing everything possible to keep from being too near this room when the Lord Susurr came to do what he would do to the captives.

The hall was darkening, faster than the outside street. Gordon suddenly stiffened against his shackles. He had heard a sound approaching.

Something was in the shadowy hall with them, something that was coming softly toward them from behind them.

THE skin between Gordon's shoulders crawled. He heard the sound shift in position as whoever had stealthily entered moved softly around in front of them.

Then, close in front of him and silhouetted against the last twilight of the open doorway, he saw the profile of Shorr Kan.

"Listen, and keep your mouths shut," whispered Shorr Kan. "You'll be dead, and worse than dead, before morning comes unless I get you out of here. There's a chance I can do it."

"And why would you do a thing like that?" asked Gordon.

"He loves us, that's why," muttered Hull Burrel. "He's so full of lovingkindness that he just can't bear to see us hurt."

"Oh, God," whispered Shorr Kan, "give me a smart enemy rather than a stupid friend. Look, I may have only minutes before the cursed H'harn comes."

"H'harn?"

"What you call the Magellanians. The H'harn is the name they call themselves. The Lord Susurr is one of them and when he comes here, you're through."

Gordon did not doubt that. But all the same he asked dubiously, "If the creature is such a terrific telepath, won't he know that you're here right now?"

There was contempt in Shorr

Kan's answer. "You people all think the H'harn are omnipotent and omniscient. They're not. In fact, they're a bit on the stupid side in some ways. They *Do* have terrific parapsychical power, but only when they concentrate it on one object . . . they can't spread their mental power to encompass everything, and it fades out at a certain distance."

Gordon knew that from his own experience at Teyn, but he made no comment. Shorr Kan jerked his head around to peer at the guards who waited uneasily out in the dusky street, and then continued in a hurried whisper.

"I have to be fast. Listen. . . I've been here in the Marches ever since the defeat of the Dark Worlds. I figured that sooner or later I could manipulate these popinjay Counts the way I wanted to. . . set them against each other, get them to fighting, and when the smoke cleared away, Shorr Kan would be the king of the Marches. And I would have done it, too, but for one thing.

"The agents of the H'harn came from outside the galaxy, and made contact with Cyn Cryver and Narath Teyn and certain other of the Counts. The H'harn took a beating when they tried to invade long ago and it's taken them all that time to recover from it, but they're strong again and they still mean to come into our galaxy in a different way."

"What way?" asked Gordon.

"I don't know," answered Shorr Kan. "I'm not sure that even Cyn Cryver knows. I do know that the H'harn are preparing something big out there in the Megallanic Clouds, something against which our galaxy will be defenseless. What it is, I haven't the slightest idea."

He went on. "Those of the H'harn who have come here so far like Susurr here and others, are agents sent ahead to make alliance with the Counts and prepare the way for some kind of assault. The H'harn have assured Cyn Cryver and the others that they'll be given half the galaxy for their aid. And the bloody fools believe it!"

"But you don't?"

"Look, Gordon, did you find me an idiot when we fought each other in the old days? The H'harn are unhuman, so unhuman that they take good care not to show themselves bodily lest they scare off their allies here. Of course they'll use the Counts, and of course they'll brush them aside when they've succeeded in their plans, and what will their promises be worth?"

"About as much," muttered Gordon, "as the promises of Shorr Kan."

SHORR Kan chuckled briefly. "I asked for that. But no matter . . . I've had to guard my

thoughts carefully. The moment that that damned alien here got suspicious and probed my mind, I'd be through. I can't keep my guard up forever. I've got to get out of here. But one man can't operate a ship. Three men could. That's why I need you." His whisper became emphatic. "Give me your word that you'll go wherever I want to go, once we get a ship, and I'll free you right now!"

"Give our word to Shorr Kan?" said Hull. "That would be a really brilliant thing to do . . ."

"Hull, listen!" said Gordon swiftly. "If Shorr Kan double-crosses us the moment we're out of here, we'd still not be as bad off as when that alien gets through with us. Give him your word. I do."

The Antarian sullenly muttered, "All right. It's given."

Shorr Kan produced something from under his coat that glistened dully in the last shadowy light from the doorway. It was a heavy semi-circular metal hook whose cutting inner edge was serrated.

"I've no key to your shackles but this should cut them," he whispered. "Hold your hands wide, Gordon, unless you want one of them cut off."

He slipped around behind the pillar to which Gordon was shackled, and began sawing at the schackle. The sound seemed loud to Gordon's ears but the

shadowy figures of the guards out in the street did not move.

"Almost through," muttered Shorr Kan after a few moments. "If you'll. . ."

His whisper suddenly stopped. The sawing stopped and there was a stealthy sound of rapid withdrawal.

"What . . ." Gordon began, and then his heart throbbed painfully as he saw.

Out in the dusk-wrapped street still not as dark as the interior of this hall, the guardsmen were moving away, shrinking back. They went all the way back until their backs were against the building on the opposite side of the street.

And a cowed, robed figure of shimmering gray, not quite as tall as a man, appeared in the doorway. In complete silence, it moved, with the horribly fluid, gliding movement that Gordon had seen once before, into the darkness of the hall toward them.

Gordon's whole body stiffened involuntarily. He heard a sharp indrawing of breath from the Antarian, who had not looked upon one of the H'harn before. There was a moment in which the shadowy figure seemed to hesitate between them, and then the choice was made and it swayed toward Gordon and he waited for the blasting mental force to burst into his brain.

A shadow skittered in the dark-

ness, a low anguished hissing came from the H'harn, and its body swayed unsteadily aside. And against the last light of the doorway, Gordon saw Shorr Kan's silhouette as he dug the serrated hook deep, deep into the robed one's back.

In an access of revulsion, Gordon strained violently and the almost-severed shackles snapped.

He could not see clearly the nightmare that was going on now in the dark hall.

The H'harn seemed to be tottering away, mewling and hissing, as Shorr Kan stabbed and stabbed.

"Help me kill it!" panted Shorr Kan. "Help me . . ."

THERE was no weapon but Gordon grabbed up the chair by the table and rushed and struck. The mewling thing was down now.

Pain, pain, shot in terrible waves through Gordon's brain, coming consciously or unconsciously from the stricken alien. He staggered, went to his knees.

A wave of black agony swept over him and receded. He got up, shakily. He glimpsed the dark figure of the two guards in the street running now toward the doorway of this room. They hesitated, at the doorway.

"Lord Susurr?" called one, his voice high-pitched and shrill.

Shorr Kan's stunner buzzed in

the dark and the two men in the doorway fell.

"Saw Burrel's shackle, and hurry," said Shorr Kan hoarsely, handing him the hook that now was wet to the hilt.

As Gordon did so, he saw Shorr Kan stoop and tear open the robe of the huddled heap on the floor, but he could not see what the dead H'harn looked like. He heard a sharp sound from Shorr Kan.

The shackle parted. Shorr Kan hurried them toward the rear of the dark hall.

"This way. I *don't* think we have all the time in the world."

The little spaceport beyond the dead town lay dark and silent under the stars, when they reached it. Shorr Kan led them toward one small ship that lay apart from the others. Its black bulk loomed before them, and to Gordon it seemed oddly strange in outline, with thick vanes sprouting from its sides such as he had seen on no other starship.

"It's the ship in which the four H'harn agents came to this galaxy," said Shorr Kan, fumbling with the lock-catch. "The other three went to Teyn and other worlds, but the ship was left here with Susurr. From what I've heard, it's far faster than any ship we know of, so if we get away in it, they'll never catch us."

When they had got inside and the hooded lights in the control-

bridge were on, Hull Burrel uttered a grunt of astonishment.

"Well, don't stand there," Shorr Kan said impatiently. "You're the professional spacemen here . . . get busy and get us the devil out of here."

"I never saw a control-board like this," Hull objected. "Some of those controls don't seem to mean a thing. They . . ."

"Some of the controls are familiar to you, aren't they?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Then use the ones you know, but take off!"

Hull Burrel, his professional soul outraged by the sloppiness of such a suggestion, nevertheless took the pilot chair. It was far too small for him and his knees came almost to his chin as he poked and prodded and pulled.

The little ship went away from Aar fast, bursting out of the darkness of the night side of the planet into the brilliant sun.

"What course?" demanded the Antarian.

Shorr Kan gave him the bearings. Hull Burrel cautiously set them up, swearing at the unfamiliarity of the calibrations.

"I'm not laying a course, I'm just making an educated guess," he grumbled. "We'll likely pole up in the drift somewhere."

GORDON watched the lonely stars ahead, as they rushed on, and his shakiness left him.

"We're heading out toward the rim of the galaxy?" he asked, and Shorr Kan nodded. "Where will we swing back in, then?"

"We won't swing back in," answered Shorr Kan calmly. "We're going right on."

Hull swung around. "What do you mean? There's nothing beyond but inter-galactic space . . . nothing!"

"You forget," reminded Shorr Kan. "There are the Magellanic Clouds . . . the worlds of the H'harn."

"For God's sake, why would we want to go *there*?"

Shorr Kan laughed. "I feared this would be a shock to you. But I have your word, remember. It stands thus: the H'harn are preparing something out there, with which to strike at our galaxy. So . . . we go out on a reconnaissance. We find out what it is. And we bring back that knowledge so the star-kings can prepare against the H'harn. After all . . . isn't that the mission on which you two came?"

"But why should *you* risk your neck to save the star-kingdoms?" Gordon demanded.

Shorr Kan shrugged. "The reason is simple. I couldn't stay much longer with the Counts without betraying my suspicions of their H'harn allies . . . and the moment any H'harn saw that in my mind, I'd be dead. But I

(Continued on page 56)

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From the shoreless sea of nothingness around him, he struggled to understand the . . .

SUMMONS OF THE VOID

By DANIEL F. GALOUYE

Illustrator DOUGLAS

ITS IRIDESCENT SHAFTS radiating in all directions, the light blazed against an infinity of blackness. It was at the same time both blinding and almost imperceptibly dim.

And the sound that filled the void, along with the soft yet harsh rays, was a deafening symphony commingled with all the dissonant noises ever made. Still, he heard it as but an embarrassed whisper lost in the cavernous silence of a great cathedral.

The musiclike sound and the restless light came from everywhere. Yet they came from nowhere.

Alone, he faced the unnatural, endless night that, with all its terrifying implications, chal-

lenged his sanctuary of illumination. Abject fear forced him closer to the light and, like a moth fatally hugging the flame, he drew courage from the warmth of its rays.

Hugo Vanderloff, bowed under the weight of humility, stood before the broad, glass-surfaced desk. Dejection was manifest in the slope of his bony shoulders, the downcast gaze of his eyes, the characteristic unkemptness of his thinly scattered, gray hair.

"I wouldn't be imposing on the university, Dr. Whitmore," he pleaded. "I could scrape together whatever I need."

"I'm sorry, Hugo," President Whitmore said distantly, "but



it's been years since we've received any grants for even *legitimate* research."

Whitmore, tall and severe, seemed emphatically young—particularly in the other's presence. Young and smugly self-sufficient.

"But it's not a matter of financing an ambitious project!" Vanderloff leaned forward, his gnarled fingers splayed upon the desk. "I could improvise *all* the apparatus."

Pivoting around impatiently in his swivel chair, Whitmore stared out the window, opposing fingertips raised steeplelike before his face. "Dr. Vanderloff, you are ignoring the dignity of this institution, even your own personal dignity. You are director of our physics department—not our *paraphysical* or *metapsychological* department."

"But sensory perception is *basic*! All physical effects exist only in being perceived!"

The president laughed brassily. "I never figured you for a Berkeleianist, Hugo."

"I'm not," Vanderloff snapped. "I intended to make the point that research in perception is the privilege of *any* scientist."

The other leaned back grinning superciliously. "And you'd like me to authorize a project so you can amuse yourself in a little game of, ah—clairvoyant perception." Whitmore's voice

dipped to give disdainful emphasis to the last two words.

Vanderloff closed his eyes and began forbearingly, "I'm convinced there must be means beyond the senses of reaching the isolated island of the individual mind. Present research fails to consider that supernormal perception might be achieved artificially."

Whitmore swiveled toward the window again and clasped his hands behind his head.

"Perhaps some form of modified light or sound might stimulate extrasensory perception," the physicist went on hopefully. "After all, sight and hearing are merely two resultants of the same physical process—vibratory propagation. Somewhere along the sonic-electromagnetic spectrum there may be a wavelength or a combination of frequencies that can be received directly by the mind."

Whitmore cleared his throat finally. "And you want to build an apparatus that will emanate on many different frequencies and see whether you can't intercept those emanations physically, so to speak?"

Vanderloff nodded eagerly.

"The answer," said the other with an ostentatious display of self-restraint, "is no."

Despite his utter disappointment, Vanderloff paused outside the president's office and won-

dered how violently Whitmore would have reacted had he known the *true* objective of the proposed research.

Clinging to the poignant recollection, he savored his respite from the abysmal infinity of blackness. For a brief moment he had been swept up almost bodily into the former reality of the incident and had forgotten his frantic dependency on the light-sound for security against the awful, interminable night.

But the edge of the boundless void closed in upon him again and he embraced the soft, iridescent rays even more desperately.

This, then, must be the experiment. He must have successfully invaded the parapsysical research field. He must, even at this moment, be proving that at least one frequency of sound or electromagnetic oscillation or some chance combination of both could be received directly by the intellect.

But why was he so hopelessly lost in the experience? Why was there this sense of utter physical detachment, of timelessness? It was as though he were trapped in the extrasensory light-sound emanations.

And what was it that so urgently required him to leave the sanctuary of the light and music and venture into the terrifying,

silent darkness? What must he search for out there?

He nagged his memory for additional details of the ephemeral past. But it was as though his entire personal history consisted of the one incident wherein he had made, and was refused, an humble request for research privileges.

The soft yet harsh light was fluctuating now—wavering and steadying, strengthening and diminishing. And the somber music had become erratic, as though someone were violently twisting the volume control of an amplifying circuit. Both the rays and the sound almost faded completely several times, leaving him horrified before the sudden onrush of timeless night.

Abruptly, he wondered whether the fluctuations might be some sort of signal. Then, quite suddenly, he was certain they were. He wouldn't have provided a supersensory highway into the mind without having incorporated a means of communication along that road.

Then he tensed, ignoring even his anxiety over the signaling light-sound. For another fragment of past experience was unfolding . . .

"You're going to go ahead with it anyway?"

Without replying, Vanderloff stared thoughtfully at the in-

structor, almost envying him his youth and vitality.

"Yes, John," he answered finally. "I'm afraid I am. This will probably be my last chance to use the equipment. Whitmore's going to retire me in another year. I'm sure of it."

John Barnett wedged a cigarette between his lips and let it hang there unlighted. "What sort of equipment do you need?"

"This room, chiefly." Slowly, the physicist glanced around the large basement compartment. "Used to be a reactor here at one time, so it's well shielded. It'll block off any emanations that might get loose and give us away."

Barnett plucked the cigarette from his lips and frowned. "But the shielding—won't it defeat the purpose of the experiment?"

"Not at all." Vanderloff smiled indulgently. "If any of the radiation or sound has a psychic component, that part of the waves will manage to get through to anyone intent upon receiving it, regardless of the amount of *physical* shielding that's in the way."

"Oh," said the other concessively. Then he strode around the empty room, running his fingers over the dull, metal walls. "What else do you need?"

"A whole range of generators, transmitters, light producing devices. I want to cover as much

of the electromagnetic spectrum as I can—beginning with visible light, ultraviolet, infrared. We'll also get into various X-ray frequencies and some of the harder radiations. Then we'll go in the other direction along the band—heat waves, short and long radio waves and possibly some of the untested frequencies."

"All this stuff will be going on at one time?"

"Not necessarily. But we'll keep as much of it in operation as we can without drawing excessive power. We'll work the units in combinations. And we'll be dabbling in the sound spectrum at the same time, hitting as many wavelengths as possible, from extreme supersonic on down into the bottom frequencies."

The younger man looked around and laughed. "It's going to be a madhouse in here."

"Not too much. There'll be a semblance of order. I'm going to use the same sonic impulses to modulate the electromagnetic radiations. Whatever equipment is in use at any one time will be in harmonious phase."

Barnett ground his cigarette out under his heel. "When do we start?"

"You mean you'll help?" Vanderloff asked, surprised.

"Try and stop me."

"You could get in trouble. With me, it doesn't matter. I'll be

out of here one way or another within the next year."

"Knowing Whitmore, I'd say getting booted from these hallowed halls could be a blessing."

Vanderloff offered a faint, tired smile of appreciation. "I've been putting aside the equipment for years. All we have to do is assemble it."

"What sort of system do we follow?"

"You stay here and twist dials, shift frequencies, vary combinations of generators and transmitters. To begin with, my post will be in the faculty dormitory. I'll try to determine, by concentration, whether the equipment is on or off. That agreeable to you?"

"You've got yourself a deal, provided we trade posts occasionally."

The physicist nodded acquiescently, wondering when he should let the other in on the *real* purpose behind the experiments.

But what *was* the real purpose and why couldn't he remember it?

He dismissed the recalled incident, only to become appallingly aware once again of the imponderable stretch of psychic infinity all around him. He recoiled from the vast blackness and sought out the musical light.

But he was no longer on the

edge of infinity. He was well within it and a terrible fear clutched at him while he searched frantically for the iridescent light and listened intently for the soft-harsh sound.

A great swell of relief swept over him as he relocated the almost infinitesimal glow—how far in the distance there was no way of telling—and heard the faint strain of melody. With a desperate speed, he returned to his only sanctuary in the limitless void.

And once more he took refuge in the past, summoning again the basement compartment scene.

How vivid was the remembered action! Without the distraction of his normal senses, without awareness of his own body processes and of the subtle background of kinesthetic sensation, his memory of the incident was startlingly real. And reviewing the event was almost like a process of recreation.

This time, as he watched himself and the young instructor leave the room, his attention was attracted by a curler of smoke that drifted up from the floor. It came from the cigarette which he thought Barnett had ground out under his heel. A draft from the ventilator fanned the spark and it drew fuel from the oil stain in which it lay.

Confused by the deceptive il-

lusion of reality, he worried that should the stain and a nearby puddle of oil ignite, attention might be drawn to the almost forgotten compartment and the university might decide to put it to use. Then there would be no chance to carry out his planned research.

He willed the spark extinguished and it immediately died out, sending up a final wisp of smoke.

But, he wondered puzzledly, how could he reach into his memory of a scene and alter its former reality? Then he realized it must have merely been a delusion. Probably the glowing cigarette had actually been crushed out successfully when it was first thrown away and he was only now imagining it had continued to burn.

"Dr. Vanderloff!"

From the immensity of the void, his own name boomed at him with the force of a million voices. And he cringed from the awful impact of the overwhelming sound.

"Dr. Vanderloff! Answer!"

It was the voice of the light crying out arrogantly against the boundless psychic sea of blackness. It was a recurrent, whispered theme of the music—a blend of sound and illumination that spelled out his name again and again.

The light flickered frenziedly and the melody erratically swelled and faded, surging proudly in volume and plunging humbly back down to an almost whispered pianissimo. And the darkness pulsed in a counter-rhythm, lunging inward upon the light only to retreat again like a sea falling away from the beach.

But, of course—it *was* a signal!

He remembered now. It had been Barnett's idea. He had suggested how communication might be carried on without disrupting the amplitude of the parapsychical frequencies. By simply turning a master switch on and off, by flicking it like a telegraphic key, the strength of the emanation could be made to vary in a Morse code effect.

And it was this flashing of light, together with the swelling and diminishing intensity of the melody, that formed his name against the infinite nothingness which surrounded him.

"Dr. Vanderloff! Are you there? What's it like, Hugo?"

There was a desperate anxiety to the signals and he knew he had to answer.

But how? Had they arranged a means of accomplishing that too? If so, why couldn't he remember what he must do to complete the bridge of communication?

Once again (as he had done hundreds of times in the past, he realized now) he sat in the dark silence of his study, his head bowed and eyes closed, his hands resting limp on his desk.

But the pencil had remained untouched and the pad had lain there gathering dust while week after week had passed without the necessity of jotting down a single notation.

He tried to lock all other considerations out of his mind, but his thoughts kept returning impatiently to the basement room—to the young instructor who was feeding the modulating sound waves of the symphony into bias circuits of the transmitting units.

Forcibly, he restricted his consciousness to an almost senseless blankness and concentrated intently on the psychical direction and distance of the basement room.

He sat there motionless for perhaps an hour.

Then, as though someone had suddenly thrown open a special window to his mind, he winced before a blazing iridescent light that flared up to dispel the sightless darkness of his concentration.

There was no mistaking the effect. It was not a false sensation of vision caused by chance stimulation of an optic nerve. Nor was it a trick of his imagi-

nation. This was it. This was metaphysical perception!

Driven by a sense of urgency, he snapped on the desk light, glanced at his watch and jotted down the time on his pad. Then he reached excitedly for the telephone.

"We've got it, John!" he blurted a minute later. "What was the setup at (he looked back at the pad) ten-eighteen and twenty-two seconds?"

"Are you sure?" Barnett demanded eagerly. "Did you really see something?"

"I saw it, all right. There was no mistaking psychic reception. Do you have a record of the setup on paper, John?"

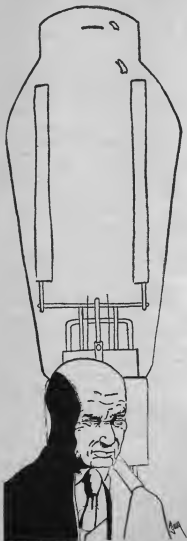
"Of course. And the apparatus is still sending. We've got a basic sound frequency of a little over fifty-six thousand cycles modulating two other pieces of equipment: the long-wave transmitter putting out at a wavelength of between ninety-six and ninety-seven thousand meters, and the Crookes tube generating X-rays of three and twenty-five hundredths angstrom units."

"That's the combination, then! For God's sake, John, don't lose it!"

But Barnett was silent on the other end of the line for a long while.

Finally his voice came through in a hoarse whisper. "I got it too, Hugo! I closed my eyes and con-

concentrated and there it was—a great blaze of light and a tremendous roar of silent music



coming through the shielding!"

"Leave it on. I want to try it again. Then I'll be right over."

Vanderloff settled back in his chair, closed his eyes and let the extrasensory emanations pour in. The light was strong and bright, now. And the musical tones were loud and clear, though distorted. But wasn't that as it should be, since he was perceiving through no normal sensory receptor?

Despite his preoccupation, he was suddenly aware of the pain in his chest and he coughed spasmodically, almost disrupting his rapport with the light-sound. But it was a simple thing to dismiss the pain now. By concentrating on the extrasensory, he could push almost all physical sensations completely into the background.

That had been his first success.

There must have been many after that, he suspected almost with conviction. But why couldn't he remember them? And why was he now trapped, so to speak, in the psychic void, frenziedly crowding the light-sound so he wouldn't become lost in his metaphysical infinity? Was there a hypnotic effect to the parapsychical emanations—an effect that held him like a prisoner?

And, perhaps even more important, why did he keep suggesting to himself that there was

a *real* purpose behind the research—a purpose which he had to hide from Whitmore and, for a while, from Barnett too?

The light and sound began fluctuating wildly again and, with a facility he couldn't remember acquiring, he interpreted the anxiously coded message:

"What's it like, Dr. Vanderloff? Can you hear me? Are you there? Can you answer?"

Questions thundering at him, overshooting and crashing arrogantly out into the impenetrable, featureless infinity.

There was something illogical here, he decided finally. Why should there be questions if he had no way of responding?

Then suddenly he was thinking of a switch—a very delicate and sensitive piece of equipment that had been designed by Barnett. So sensitive, so capable of being activated by the slightest force, that they had enclosed it in a vacuum. The theory was that if psychokinetic power could manipulate any apparatus at all, it would manipulate this one.

And it had!

Perhaps success of the switch lay in the fact that the presence of the metaphysical emanations gave tangible force to volition. Or it may have been that withdrawal from total dependency on the physical senses provided thought with a slight kinetic impetus. At any rate, by concen-

trating during the experiments, he had consistently been able to throw the switch on and off at will and operate a telegraphic key to complete the two-way communicative bridge.

"Are you there, Hugo? Can you hear?"

"I am here, John."

The light-sound remained steady for a long while—as though his message hadn't been received at all, or as though its reception had occasioned a stunned silence.

"Good God, Hugo! Is it really you?"

Barnett's code came through full of mistakes, almost garbled. And the psychic light and metaphysical sound fluctuated crazily in transmitting it.

"I am here," Vanderloff repeated.

Again the coded response was almost unintelligible. But, allowing for the errors and the apparent frenzy with which it had been transmitted, Vanderloff managed to understand it:

"Can't believe this! Greatest thing that ever happened! Do you realize what this means?"

Vanderloff maintained a perplexed silence. After all, this wasn't the first time the extra-sensory experiment had worked, although it might be their initial success with *communicating* through the psychic medium. But then, carrying on a conver-

sation wasn't that much more spectacular than metaphysical perception itself. So why should Barnett seem so astonished?

"Are you actually there, Hugo? What's it like? What do you see?"

Suddenly a paralyzing realization exploded throughout the structure of his conscious, leaving him mentally numb with terror and despair such as no living man had ever experienced before.

Momentarily he overcame his reaction of utter helplessness—long enough to code a few frantic words:

"Leave it on, John! For God's sake, don't turn it off!"

He had no way of knowing whether his switch triggering impulses had been coherent enough to convey the message. Then suddenly it made no difference whether he had gotten through or not. An overpowering listlessness gripped him and he seemed to be eternally suspended between the infinite void and the now mocking light-sound.

The musical shafts of illumination flickered derisively with Barnett's answering code. But Vanderloff was stricken with the universal uselessness of all things and he didn't even try to interpret the message.

He could almost disregard the light and the sound now. It was, would ever be, he and the in-

terminable night.

For, finally, he knew the *real* purpose of the experiments.

There was the time (toward the end, he remembered now) when he had lain on the cloud of whiteness that had been the hospital bed, his weak, emaciated hands outstretched beside him, his nasal passages burning with an influx of oxygen from the tube that was taped to his face.

Vaguely, he remembered opening his eyes and seeing Barnett standing there, solicitude and anxiety vivid in his stare.

"Why didn't you tell us, Hugo?" the younger man asked.

Vanderloff braced himself against the stabbing malignant pain in his chest. "I was afraid you'd guess why I was so eager to complete the experiments. I thought you'd wash your hands of what could seem like spiritualism masquerading under the cover of science."

Barnett frowned. "I don't understand."

"I wasn't really interested in extrasensory perception. Our research actually was into the phenomena of death and what happens afterward. I didn't want to become a disembodied intellect, lost in a vast, impenetrable blackness. I didn't want to be consigned to the primitive superstitions of heaven or hell. I wanted something better. I

wanted a way to maintain contact with the physical world."

There was no sign of comprehension on the young instructor's face.

"Don't you see that the intellect isn't physical at all?" Vanderloff went on weakly. "The sum total of our experiences—the spiritual *I*—*can't* cease to exist when the functions of the body come to a halt. The intellect *must* go on. But it's completely isolated from the concrete world because it's deprived of all connections with that world—sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell, vocal power and so forth."

The physicist paused and strained against another surge of pain. Then he went on, even more slowly, more laboriously, "How many intellects must be lost in that sea of psychic darkness from one another! Each an island unto himself. Each an infinite universe in himself. Each forever banished into the solitary, boundless darkness of his own mentality."

There was eager understanding in the other's stare now.

"But the bridge we built will change all that," Vanderloff continued, pausing to cough away his excitement. "The psychic emanations we discovered will be a beacon shining out into the isolated universe of each intellect that learns how to use it. It will orient us to a physical point in

the concrete world. It will be our continuing connection with reality—the only means by which we can avert eternal exile."

Vanderloff's head rolled feebly on the pillow and he added in a whisper. "When I go, John, you've *got* to keep the beacon burning."

This, then, was death.

And despite the elaborate measures he had taken to escape total banishment of the intellect in psychic infinity, he realized now how abysmally inadequate was the light.

What benefit could he expect from perpetuating such meager contact with the physical reality of the living? What could he gain other than the hollow realization that he was in communication with the mortal world? Reality had nothing to offer his metaphysical self.

And if he should cling obstinately to the light-sound, the stygian infinity which he had so desperately tried to avoid would always be there waiting for him—waiting for the moment when his mortal counterparts might fail to maintain the beacon.

Then—when the time finally came that the musical light could no longer be sustained, when its last shimmering ray was propagated and its final coda played—then the waiting darkness would be there to claim him. And the

brief moment he would have resisted ebon infinity would have been as nothing compared with the awful and endless sweep of eternity.

With these considerations, the light-sound which he had embraced so fervently ceased to extend any consolation whatever. For he hadn't escaped eternity at all. He had only forestalled it.

What, then, was his lot? Was he forevermore apart from all other intellects, facing indescribable loneliness in the terrifying darkness of his own psychic universe? Or was there something else waiting for him on the other side of infinity?

Hesitantly, he summoned the gamut of religious beliefs and superstitions, primordial fears and divine aspirations that had marked man's theological evolution. And, in reviewing the whole doctrinal range, he wondered at which point in his own material existence he had rashly abandoned his faith.

(This sudden seizure of near remorse, he asked himself curiously—was it a valid sentiment? Or did it only reflect a sudden deferential fear of whatever Omnipotent Being might be lurking beyond this infinity to extract vengeance?

(Mocking his apprehensive uncertainty, a ripple of derision seemed to course abruptly through the boundless void. Or

was it, again, only his imagination?)

But Who *could* be waiting?

God? Jehovah? Baal? The Lord? Zeus? Allah? Christ? The Supreme Being? Shiva? Brahma? Vishnu? Ra? The First Cause? Yahweh? The Almighty Creator? Jupiter? The Holy Ghost? Odin? The Universal Soul? Apollo?

And, after he left the sanctuary of the light-sound, to what might his passage through the interminable night lead?

Heaven? Elysian Fields? The Happy Hunting Grounds? Valhalla? Olympus? St. Peter and the Golden Gates? Nirvana? The Happy Isles? Seventh Heaven?

Or would it be Hell? The Infernal Regions? Everlasting Darkness? Satan? Hades? Charon? The Realms of Pluto? Sheol? Eternal Damnation? The Inferno? Endless Punishment? Purgatory? The River Styx? Limbo? Gehenna?

Whatever awaited him, he could put it off no longer. Even centuries of delay would gain him a reprieve of only insignificant duration compared with the great boundlessness of eternity.

He must go and search out his fate *now*—while paralysis over the discovery of his death held him in a numb grip and made the supreme challenge seem commonplace. And even as he im-

aged himself abandoning his sanctuary, he was aware that the musical rays were receding into the very depths of infinity, leaving him alone in the intolerable blackness and soundlessness.

Thus he began his search in the vast, vacuous, lightless sea—like Diogenes. Only, he had no lantern to guide him and there was a cosmic uncertainty as to the nature of the Entity or the place which he sought.

After a while (it may have been a few seconds or a few thousand years, there being neither time nor means of measuring it in this new extraphysical existence) he wondered whether he was making any progress through the void.

Then suddenly the very concept of motion in a measureless and featureless infinity seemed supremely ridiculous and it was only then that he realized he was dismally lost.

Frantically, he turned (how, he wondered incidentally, could there be such a thing as a turn with no reference point?) and sought out the musical rays once more. But there was only the impenetrable blackness. He had irretrievably lost the light-sound and now there would be only an eternity of . . . nothing.

With a poignant wistfulness, he thought of the henceforth un-

attainable communicative bridge to Barnett and Earth—of Earth itself and the fascinating universe of matter and energy that surrounded it. The stars and galaxies; the sun warm and reassuring; the planets and nebulae; even the friendly, half-darkness of the interstellar void.

If he had been God he would have created just such a universe. And he would have placed at its center just such a world as Earth—Earth, with its lofty and splendid mountains and cool-warm breezes, its brilliant clouds and fine white beaches and rich vegetation and tall, swaying trees, its sunlight and moonlight, its stars and its surging seas.

With his unbearable sense of loss came the first shredding effects of panic. And he wondered whether the welling sensation, when it reached its full and interminable climax, might not be the endless hell that awaited him.

But he calmed himself purposely and continued the hopeless search.

Perhaps this *was* his eternal punishment—floundering helplessly in an immeasurable sea of black nothingness throughout all time, while he wished futilely for something, anything—perhaps even the tortures of a seemingly physical hell—to relieve the unbearable monotony.

His soul screamed out its bit-

ter protest, its frantic insistence that there *must* be something else in the metaphysical after-world.

But what? And where? And how could he ever find it without light to show the way?

With a torturous urgency, he wished for illumination to dispel the blackness.

And suddenly there *was* light!

A whole universe of blazing, wheeling, surging, shimmering light. The light of thousands of galaxylike masses, comprised of billions of coruscating droplets of fierce illumination.

Great splotches of light in the shape of spinning pinwheels stretching away into what had only seconds ago been a dismal infinity of hopeless nothingness.

Hypnotized by the wonders of his own psychic creation, he inspected what he had wrought.

Around the pinpoints of sparkling light he discerned smaller bodies of nonluminous material that whirled in concentric circles.

And it seemed a foregone conclusion that many of those lesser spheres could be, if he should so decree almost exactly like Earth.

It was infinite fun and he was infinitely pleased, knowing that whenever he chose he could go down and enjoy what he had created, become a part of it.

But it would be so much more interesting to maintain his status as a detached, causative entity and observe the processes he had set in motion.

THE END

THE SHORES OF INFINITY

(Continued from page 40)

wouldn't go back to the star-kingdoms, either, for they'd hang me for certain when they found I was still living."

"They'll still hang you," said Hull.

"Will they?" Shorr Kan laughed. "Why, if I come back with a warning of the H'harn plans, the past will be forgotten. I'll be a hero, and you don't hang heroes. I gamble that I'll be on a throne again, in a year."

Hull Burrel appealed to Gordon. "Do we let him take advantage of the fact that we've given our word, to do this?"

Gordon answered thoughtfully. "We do Hull. Not just because of our word, but something else . . . he's right when he reminds us that this is our mission."

Hull Burrel uttered a loud curse. "You're a fool, John Gordon, but I'll go along with it. I've lived long enough anyway, so I might as well commit suicide going on an impossible mission with a damned fool and the biggest villain in the galaxy."

Shorr Kan clapped him heartily on the back. "That's the spirit! What is there in the universe that can stop brave hearts and loyal comrades?"

THE END

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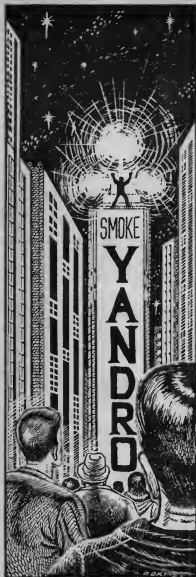
By **DAVID ELY**

Illustrator **ADKINS**

*Every day had always been the same for William until
he found a way to turn his hatred for mankind
into what he thought of as love.*

EVERY afternoon at 5 o'clock, William left the engineering office where he was a senior draftsman and squeezed into an elevator among perfumed secretaries and sweaty clerks—then, on the street, more perspiring bodies, bumping and jostling him, a river of rudely swinging arms and legs and human odors, all flowing in a viscous mass toward the subway entrances, where every thing became inexpressibly worse. In the dancing train, he stood rigid in his clean linen suit, but despite his efforts to remain upright, his body swayed with the joggling motion as if yielding to the command of some diabolical music, and to his disgust, he rubbed arms, legs,

buttocks, with his neighbors—especially the shop-girls who sucked their lower lips and wriggled responsively to his unintended tresspasses, who sometimes let their dark little goat eyes rove up and down his slender neatness like fingers, unbuttoning and stroking and naughtily giggling, in violation of his will, as he stared furiously at the advertisements. Oh, how he loathed them, hated them all, the ones who could thus tyrannize over him when he was caught helpless, in this daily vise. And yet, to remain at the office until this horror abated would cut seriously into the time he devoted to the practice of his meditative system.



At 5:45, he reached his tiny rooms on the third floor of an apartment building: a living-room, a kitchenette with a dining nook and a bedroom, where William prepared himself for his daily ritual before the three huge matched mirror he had placed so carefully, even to the last fraction of an inch. First, he took off his linen suit and carefully folded it away in the closet. Then he removed the rest of his clothing and, quite naked, squatted down on his heels on the carpet, his arms folded over his chest, his head arched back. Thus he remained. By and by the street noises softened and faded, the rude jolts and thumps within the building itself died away, and William was left in peaceful solitude and quiet. Often he remained poised for hours this way, until he surrendered to a delicious weariness.

IT WAS release, release from the racket and noisome pressure of the crowd. The meditations taught William how to achieve tranquility, how to preserve the purity and control of his mind and body, in the midst of the city's chaos. Perhaps they would do even more. William wondered. Would his system not also some day extend its influence beyond his own individual compass? He thought possibly it would; it had done so much for

him already, surely it could go one step further and help others, too. Still, if others were to be helped, they first would need to be told about the system, to be shown and convinced, to try it out, perhaps—and how was this to be done, if William himself did not play the role of teacher? He recoiled at the thought. It would mean contact with other people, it would mean misunderstanding; ridicule, perhaps even persecution and public denunciation. Then, too, it had taken him twelve long years of patient daily application to his task to reach his present level of mastery. Could he hope to find others who would display a similar devotion? Would there be any at all? And suppose he did find a disciple—a dozen, even—what meaning would this have in the face of the many millions impossible to reach? It was hopeless. He would have to be content with his own salvation.

Yet somehow he knew it would not be so. There would be a way. He could feel a wild excitement stirring in his breast, and a powerful instinctive yearning that raced through his blood and tingled in his fingertips. Something was beginning to happen. A sense of joyful anticipation dizzied him: He was chosen, he was certain of that. He was chosen to lead them, to save them, perhaps by teaching, or by some other

means which he could not now fathom. It was not for himself alone that he had so rigorously prepared all these years; this he suddenly understood. He must wait, that was all. It would happen—soon—and he would be ready.

The summer days were oppressively hot. By noontime, the heavy air had borne the carbonaceous stench of the streets to the upper stories of even the tallest buildings. In the shimmering harbor, the ships lay stricken; the water was pressed flat and whitened by the relentless sun. Along the sidewalks, the crowds wandered in sullen exhaustion past doorways that sent forth tiny blasts of chill air and over gratings which oozed soot-laden miasmas. The passengers in the subways grunted in discomfort as each jolt of the trains brought their damp bodies unwillingly together. And yet William did not suffer as he had in summers past, for his excitement was growing, his mind was fixed on the stupendous promise about to be revealed, and he strode lithely, confidently, among the complaining people, toward his hidden goal. Soon he would know. Soon, too, the unsuspecting city would know—and everything would be changed. Instead of heat, there would be coolness; instead of the fierce headlong rush of tangling bodies, there would be peace and

stillness. Of this, William was certain.

IT HAPPENED on the last Friday in August. All day, William had been aware of great and irrevocable changes coming to pass which subtly charged the heated air with an electrical intensity. He bent over his drafting table, his eyes smarting with the effort of repressing tears of happiness. The lines on the paper seemed to blur and waver. When the telephone rang, he found he could scarcely hear it, for he was eagerly intent on the coming transformation of things and all his senses were straining to capture each tiny signal. From time to time, he would glance around the drafting room. The other men were working at their tilted tables, as always, but sometimes one of them would look up with a puzzled air and peer about anxiously, as if aware of some unseen presence. If his eyes met William's, he would gaze for a moment in a trancelike fixation, unblinking and unknowing; then, with a jerk of his head, he would duck down uneasily, back to his work. All of this William saw.

He also saw, outside, the remarkable flight of the birds: the pigeons and the starlings. Almost with one motion, they flapped and fluttered from their thousand perches on the roofs

and ledges; in lazy floating circles, around and around in great flocks, they glided toward the streets, drifting slowly down in unhurried patterns, like November snow, until the late afternoon shadows below hid them from William's view.

Below, too, the street noises, instead of quickening with the approach of the rush hour, began to soften. William could not see the streets, but he sensed what was taking place, and his heart was alive with quiet joy. Out in the harbor also, there was change. The tug boats were churning in toward the piers to rest beside the ships which lay berthed. One by one the boats docked, the last ones hurrying like tardy theater-goers rushing to their seats before an opening curtain. William's eyes swept across the water with exultation. The harbor was empty at last; the clamor of the narrow city streets had diminished to a faint, uneven hum. The city was preparing itself for the event.

The great church clock outside struck five. Each rolling stroke lingered in the stillness; each hollow echo cast down by the bell over the city settled like a soft blanket, an insulating palpable layer of sound, cooling and protective. William did not raise his head as the solemn notes were struck; he did not need to see what his heart had already per-

ceived. He bowed in prayerful thankfulness. The tolling of the great bell marked the end of what had been before. The triumphant shout of silence that followed was his signal. Now his work would begin. Everyone was waiting.

WILLIAM raised his head. For a moment, he kept his eyes closed, dreamily savoring the prospect of realization. Then he allowed his gaze to rove across the room, so familiar in its thousand details and yet now so wonderfully altered. It was one minute past five, but there was no hurried rush for the doors, no hasty bangings of desks and chairs, no chatter from the secretaries and the youthful draftsmen. Everyone sat patiently in place, looking at William. Every head was turned his way, every pair of eyes was fixed on him. The well-known faces, so placid and expressionless now, suddenly became dear and beloved. William looked at each one in turn, his own eyes dimmed by tears of affection. He rose from his desk humbly, but yet with a secret pride in his heart. He paused, then moved slowly to the outer door, the heads all turning gently to watch. He could not stop to speak to them. He had no time. But as he opened the door and took one last look back, the faces seemed so loving and yet so sad

that he could not bear to disappoint them. "Follow," he told them, "follow behind me." And as William entered the corridor, the people in the office rose from their places quietly, and keeping at a respectful distance, filed out after him, silent and orderly.

Now William was on the street. He did not recall coming down in the elevator, and yet he must have descended that way, and the office people likewise, for they were there, behind him, in a patient attentive group, watching him trustfully. Then he noticed that there were more people there, too, from some of the other offices, also silent and watchful, looking at him with rapt, solemn faces.

The great street was still. The vehicles had stopped. Beside them, the drivers and occupants were standing, waiting for William. All up and down the thoroughfare, as far as he could see, it was the same. Everywhere, people were standing, their faces turned his way. In the little restaurants and shops, too, there were motionless clusters of figures near the windows, waiting for William to summon them. He walked up the street, knowing that the people were following, and, as he passed each building entrance where more throngs were waiting to join the procession, the multitude swelled. After a few blocks, William stopped

and turned around. The people stopped, too. By now, they were so numerous that their ranks spread across the street from sidewalk to sidewalk. And so quietly had these thousands marched, that not even a footstep had been heard. William surveyed them, his eyes moist with emotion, and they looked back at him unwaveringly; and although he was simply standing as they were, in the street, it seemed to him that he was at a considerable height, for he was unmistakably aware, observing that enormous gathering of faces, of each single one. He saw the eyes most particularly; the faces were less important. He could not distinguish between men and women, not because of the distance—the foremost rank stood perhaps only thirty yards behind him—but because he was concentrating on the eyes, the thousands and thousands of eyes that were fixed unblinkingly on his. He longed to speak, for he knew they were waiting to hear him, but it still was not yet time. He had to go forward; others ahead had assembled, too, and they must be permitted to join.

SO WILLIAM resumed his steady pace, and behind him came the massed silent marchers, their numbers growing with every step, as more slipped in from the sides. Overhead, the sun beat

down, but it was a cooling sun that imperceptibly chilled the summer air and drew away its dampness. There was no moisture. All was clear, cool, dry, and the still air was free of odor, except for a slight pleasant scent, pure and mild, as of lilies. The birds were hidden and did not sing, and although the street clocks moved their hands, they passed the hours without striking. William walked on, his feet seeming to float over the pavement without sensation, without sound. Along the curbs now, the people ahead had assembled in waiting ranks, only their heads moving as they watched William pass by; then patiently they stood until the crowd approached and it was appropriate for them to enter the march.

Now William reached a huge square in the heart of the city. This was the place. Without hesitation, he walked to one corner where there stood a majestic sign, many stories high, the largest display board in the world, seen by millions of persons every day. As the multitude entered the square and began to fill all the enormous empty space, William began climbing a slender steel ladder that ran up the full height of the sign, to giant floodlights on top, which at night played not only on the sign and the square, but over the entire city as well, and even on the stars in the sky.

The floodlights, now dim, were fitted into massive frameworks riveted on heavy steel bars running the breadth of the structure and supported by upright posts. In the very center, there was a broken place, evidently the result of a violent storm. There, the crossbar had snapped in two places and the center light had been blown away. But the post remained, holding up a short section of the broken crossbar, which was perhaps five feet above the roof of the sign.

In front of this, then, William would stand. From the top of the sign he would speak to the host assembled in the square. Even now, as he climbed effortlessly ever higher, he knew what he was to say, although the exact words would not occur to him, he realized, until the very moment of utterance. At the top he saw that the moon had risen, full and large, and hovered above near the sun. Both shed a soft light, and seemed alike, as twin stars, for the moon was unusually brilliant while the sun was now oddly subdued, so they appeared the same. They were like two eyes.

HUNDREDS of feet beneath him he could see the square spread out, covered by the thousands, the millions of upturned faces, which glowed under the

gentle radiance of the sky like a frozen phosphorescent sea, almost like tiny stars. William now could hardly distinguish between sky and earth, for above and below alike glittered with the countless pricks of light, and only the two huge staring eyes of sun and moon were different; and even as he perceived this, the sun and the moon moved closer, much closer, and the infinite lights all around began to fade and lose their brilliance. William knew then that he had to speak but when he opened his mouth and formed the first words on his tongue, no sound emerged to break the silence, and then, absorbed by the sight of the now swiftly-advancing eyes, he forgot the words entirely. In the intense cold glare, he pressed back against the steel bar. As he did, and felt the torn metal edges bite sharply into the flesh of his hands, he knew at once that he was too far away, too high, for his words to be heard, even if he could have spoken, and at almost the same instant he realized that it was not with words that he would teach them; no, it was to be the other way, and so, sobbing not in pain but in gratitude for this last flash of understanding, he leaned back, back with all his might, against the jagged steel.

THE END



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EXCELLENCE

By TOM PURDOM

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

HALFWAY to the showdown Sandy and I stopped talking to each other. She wanted me to fight in the showdown. I wanted to fight, too, but I had made up my mind I wasn't going to.

When we got to Center City Recreation Hall we stood in the spectator's bunker.

My old gang, the Golden Horn Irregulars, paralyzer guns in their hands, were lined up on the floor to shoot it out with the Irish Warriors. Gentleman George had on his black suit and white gloves. Madame Marge wore her slickest cocktail dress. Reb wore his Confederate hat, Tex his scarf and sombrero, Bart his trench coat and slouch hat.

Once I would have been there, too, turtleneck sweater and beret, cigarette dangling from my lips. But now I was out of it. I was learning how to love. And at love school I had learned

I had to conquer my competitive drive

Conquer it I would, too. I'm Frenchy Wald. What I do, I do well. Better than anybody.

The buzzer sounded off. Guns whined.

Madame Marge moaned and slumped to the floor. I doubled over with her. One of the Warriors collapsed and then Walt, my replacement, and Tex. I could almost feel the gun in my hand as I shouted.

I remembered my last showdown, our first with the Warriors. I remembered the deadly touch of the gun, the swearing, the quick moans of the losers. And the tension and the wonderful excitement and the fury in my head. I'm Frenchy Wald. Die, you curs, die. For Frenchy hangs your scalps on his belt.

And I remembered, too, how I had been the last man standing on my side and how I had

laughed and shot from the hip at the Chief of the Warriors. And how Jim Strait, the Chief, had laughed, too, and shot. And I had fallen to the floor, to awaken an hour and a half later, numb and sick in the head.

"Frenchy! They're going to lose, Frenchy." Sandy tugged at me.

Out on the floor only Bart was left. Jim Strait took an easy, careful aim and that was the end of Bart.

I rocked on my heels and hugged Sandy.

"It was worse than last time," I said.

"They didn't have you," Sandy said.

I pulled her little blonde pony tail. "It's not that important," I said. "It's just a game. They'll be conscious in an hour."

Jim Strait swaggered toward the bunker and Marilyn Scott walked out on the floor to meet him. In her black dress and white hood she looked like a proud, slender ice princess. The two of them together hooked every eye that saw them.

He kissed her right there on the floor and then held her like a bright trophy won in battle.

"We'd better go," I said. I didn't want to talk to them.

"Marilyn looks very pretty," Sandy said.

"If you like the cold type," I said.

Sandy looked envious. Poor girl. All her life she had needed reassurance. She had bedded with a mob of men and boys

looking for it. Someday I'd give it to her, all the love she needed. I kissed her brow.

"C'mon," I said. "The show is over."

"Greetings, Frenchy," Jim shouted.

I waved. "Greetings, Jim."

He and Marilyn were walking toward us on their way out. My hand convulsed on Sandy's wrist. I had to stop and talk.

"Good showdown," I said.

"Thank you, Frenchy. We missed you."

She was there in front of me. I was looking down into her face, that wonderful, perfectly shaped face, all cold whites and contrasting blacks, like a Berkovitz painting. She was every image of perfection I had seen in my twenty-three years. She was the girl I had gone to love school to learn how to bed.

But that sickness love school had cured. Listen, self, I said. This girl is just a figure, a thing. You never wanted her. You wanted the proof of self-value she represents. Sandy is ardent, warm and hungry. Sandy is a person. You must learn to love Sandy.

"I'm through with showdowns," I said. "I sold my gun."

"A wise thing," Jim said. "Well, I'll see you two. So long, Sandy."

They walked away.

"Does every man look at her like that?" Sandy said.

"Well, she is nice to look at. I wouldn't want to live with her, though."



"I'll bet."

It was starting up again.
"Let's breathe some air, lady."

We left the Center and strolled down the street. It was autumn then, the autumn of '09, and my turtleneck sweater felt just right. I pulled my beret down to my right eye and lit a cigarette.

"What time is it?" I said.

"Three o'clock," Sandy said.

"I'd better get home soon. I have to practice my violin."

"That's all right. I have a class at love school."

"May I walk you there?"

"If you want to."

"Of course I want to."

I squeezed her hand and we walked along in silence. She looked sour. I decided to give her relaxing time. Meantime I gawked at the buildings. I've lived in Philly all my life but the architecture still fascinates me. On Center City all the different schools and generations get jumbled up. Colonial and old brownstone walkups sit right beside glass and steel towers. And scattered in random spots the real modern stuff hooks your eye. I like the modern stuff best. Bright colors, crazy curves and angles, statues and paintings—more decoration than a man could appreciate in a lifetime.

"I like this town," I said.
"Every corner a surprise."

The streets were full of cycles. We stopped at a corner and waited for the light.

"What are you thinking, Sandy?"

"Nothing you'd be interested in."

"Tell me. Please."

"I don't want to talk about it anymore."

We crossed the street. Two guys passed us talking at top speed. Something about Art vs. the Machine.

"How can we straighten it out if we don't talk about it?" I said.

"But all it does is upset me."

I squeezed her neck. "You're not being fair to me, lady. You said you would give me a fair chance. You said you were willing to have us explore each other."

"You're right. You're absolutely right."

"Then tell me what's wrong."

"Your friends need you, Frenchy. You should have been there."

"I'm through with show-downs."

"You can't desert your friends."

"You sound like you want me to get knocked numb."

"I don't want you to get hurt. If that's why you quit, then I'll forget the subject. I can understand that."

I threw my cigarette at the ground. Savagely.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean it that way."

"Then what did you mean?"

"I mean I just want to know why you quit. You used to look so happy out on the floor. I used to watch you and wonder how anyone could look so happy."

I couldn't tell her I was practicing love, that I was struggling with the discipline Mr. Lockhammer had worked out for me. If I ever learned to truly love, then I would tell her.

We stopped in front of the brick rowhouse that contains the Philadelphia School of Love.

"We're here," I said.

She paused in front of the steps. Sandy is blonde and slightly plump. But pretty. Her face shines and her body is all curves and soft places. She's not a statue like Marilyn Scott but a full-bodied, full-hearted girl with warmth and sincerity.

I squeezed her hand. "I like the way you look in that jacket. Trim and neat and healthy. Just like the autumn."

"Thank you."

I had told her that many times before. This time there was only a tiny attempt to smile.

"I won't see you tonight, will I, Frenchy?"

"Tonight's my night at the Elder Citizen's Club. What's on for you?"

"A lecture on anthropology."

"I guess I won't see you till the play tomorrow."

She didn't ask me to come over after I left the ECC. She was too shy and the last time I had bedded with her had been all wrong. She had been her old self, desperately struggling to obtain something you just can't get from sex, not really believing my declarations of love. I like sex as much as any man but

it's no good when there's that kind of personal tension.

"I wish we weren't so busy," she said. "But there's so much to do."

"Sandy."

"Yes?"

"It'll work out all right. I love you."

"Thank you."

"Don't look so sad."

"I'd better go, Frenchy."

"I'll phone you tonight."

"All right. 'Bye."

Just a few weeks before she had been continuously happy. That had been something. I, Frenchy Wald, can make a girl overflow with joy. But now I was losing her because I couldn't love her the way she needed to be loved.

The moon, pale in the afternoon sky, hooked my eye. I thought of the Lunar bases and how it would feel to be a spaceman. To be at the top, to know you were the best the human race had. That would solve everything. My hunger for status would be satisfied and I would be free to love.

But I'll never be a spaceman. There's nothing wrong with me, just not enough right. All I can do is work my four-hour shift at Hamburg Travel and be a dilettante. A "gentleman of culture" as they say.

Well, all right then. I'll be the best damned dilettante in town. And if that means learning how to love—I'll outlove anybody you can name!

I live in a room on the fifteenth floor of a black and yellow residential tower. If you live in Philly, you know the place.

That was where I went to practice love. Mr. Lockhammer had suggested I try loves less complicated than the love of a woman. We had decided on my violin and a three-legged cat named Macarthy.

I play the violin very well. I learned to play it because of this big competition thing. With my violin I could play with one of the best string quartets in town. I could hear the audience applaud and speak with authority on music.

I would have gone on that way if I hadn't gone to love school. Love school is a new institution and it has its faults but it taught me a lot. I went there because I wanted to improve my technique and bed Marilyn Scott, thus becoming the top lover in the city in my age group.

Anyway, after two semesters I learned something more than technique. I learned that all my life I've been doing things because I want to raise my opinion of myself and hear other people applaud me. Which may be a good motive for many things, but it isn't love.

I also became convinced love is something important. If you can't love, you're a mediocrity. And that I refuse to be. Down with the second rate.

So I quit the string quartet and the Irregulars. Every day I observed Macarthy and played

the violin. I tried to play only for myself, for the sake of the music, not for the applause of an audience.

And I started courting Sandy, who is a fine girl and perfect for me, but who has all the prestige value of a four-year-old cycle.

I got out the violin and tuned it. Macarthy lay sleeping in the netting of my bed. He was crippled and ugly and not a possession one could boast about. But I had observed the old humbug carefully and discovered he had quality. He made me laugh but I respected him, too. He had convinced me that however he had lost his leg, he had lost it honorably.

I put the music on the stand and started playing. Just as Mr. Lockhammer had instructed, with total concentration on the music itself and my reactions to it.

I warmed up with a short piece by Mozart and then started on Nikolai's *Dream of Space*. I know that's scored for drums and violins, but most of it comes through with just the violin. I listened to the sound coming from my bow. I went where the music wanted to take me. I heard the beat of the composer's heart and the way he felt about the men who venture into space. Nikolai had been younger than me then and still hadn't left Earth, so I knew how he felt.

And then, at the end of a tricky passage, I thought: I'm getting good. Wait'll they hear me play this.

I could never heave my best violin. But I put it down as hard as my pride of possession would let me. I stood in the middle of the room and thought how nice it would be to choke the cat.

I hate you, Macarthy. I hate the music. I hate Sandy. I hate you all because you've set up something I can't climb. I hate me.

I left the tower and walked the twelve blocks to love school. When I pushed open Mr. Lockhammer's door he was standing in front of a painting, a perfect reproduction of a Berkovitz.

"Frenchy! Do you have to barge in like that? Don't I get to relax?"

"I can't do it," I said. "You're asking too much."

Mr. Lockhammer is a big, cigar smoking man who's just a little too sure psychology explains everything. But his pet theories don't interfere with his teaching. He's too disciplined and he never asks questions. He sits there as poker-faced as the Universe and you have to figure out what you need to know yourself. But he'll answer anything you ask him.

"What do you people want from me?" I said. "What do I have to do?"

"You know what the answer is to both questions—nothing."

"You know what I mean. Isn't there a limit to what I have to do to be a good lover? I was sitting up there doing fine with the violin when all at once

I thought about the audience. What's wrong with that?"

"Not a thing. I told you when we started this that a normal competitive spirit is fine. In fact, in your case your competitive drive is what is making you go to such lengths to be a psychically whole man. We're not trying to stop you from competing and striving. We're trying to help you free other emotions."

"I don't have the other emotions."

"Everybody does. Quit asking for reassurance."

"But why can't I enjoy one thing without using it as a prestige symbol? What's wrong with me?"

"If you want to know why you have this problem, you should put yourself on a psych doctor's waiting list."

"You know I can't afford that. Even if I could, it would be ten years before I got my turn. I can't wait."

"Then you'll have to work it out yourself."

"I can't do it by myself! This treatment is a lot of junk. You're a phony to suggest it."

He shrugged. "Then quit. That's your affair. You pay me and I give you advice. Sympathy isn't in the contract."

I lit a cigarette and stared at the painting. It was *Woman in June Rain*, reproduced by the Blake process. It must have cost him a year's savings. After awhile I calmed down.

"What am I doing wrong with Sandy?"

"So that's it. Give me some more information."

"I'm losing her. She's given me almost everything but she won't say she loves me. And now she's getting more like her old self and the whole relationship's going sour. She's jealous of Marilyn, she complains because I wasn't in today's showdown. What am I doing wrong?"

"You're not giving her the kind of love she wants."

"I know that! But what does she want?"

"That's something I can't answer, Frenchy. I can't know her as well as you can. Only you can answer that one."

"But what can I do?"

"Just keep at it and what you're looking for will come." You've got what it takes."

"I came for advice, not reassurance."

"That's all I can tell you."

I started to go. "Listen, what are you after? What's your big aim?"

"I have many aims."

"I know, but how would you put the big one?"

"All right. Sure. To excel."

"Just like me? What do you mean by excelling?"

"Doing well everything it's in my nature to do."

"Did you have anything you had to learn when you were my age?"

"Sure I did. I had to learn I couldn't solve everybody's problems for them. That's a hard thing to learn, son, when you're

sensitive to pain. As hard as what you've got."

So I got something out of him besides release. Perhaps I had gotten everything out of love school they could give me. But where else could I go for help?

I had dinner at a sidewalk cafeteria on Market Street. Plankton steak and a pretty good wine. Just as I was leaving the manager broke down. I hung around for awhile and watched the technicians work on it. I didn't understand much of what they did but it got my mind off me.

When I got home from my volunteer night at the Elder Citizen's Club I stuck my head in the reading machine. After an hour of gobbling up copies of *Scientific World* and *Humanity* I figured I was tired enough to fall asleep. I was, but only to a dream in which Jim Strait made love to Sandy while I pursued an uncatchable Marilyn.

When I woke up I remembered I had forgotten to call Sandy. But I had slept through the alarm and I just had time to get to my work. And at work we had a sudden out of season busy spell and I didn't get away from the Travel Computer until my shift ended at noon.

Sandy happened to be home. "I'm sorry I didn't call," I said.

"I waited up for you. You should have called."

"I had a bad time at the ECC. When I got home I just wanted to sleep."

"What happened?"

"You know how it is there. All those old people who never learned how to use their time. This old woman started taking her anger out on me. It wore me out."

"That's too bad, Frenchy. You should have called me. You never call me when you're feeling bad."

"Yes, I do. I have lots of times."

"Not for someone who's supposed to be in love."

"Damn! You're right," I said. "I'm sorry."

She needed love so bad. She was so timid and afraid she wasn't up to standard.

"Tell me you love me," she said.

"I love you madly."

"Thank you."

"How do you feel?"

"All right."

But her voice said she didn't.

"I'll see you at dinner," I said. "And after that the play."

"Where do you want to go afterward?"

"Why don't we go to the Horn?"

"I have a new tape I want you to hear. It's some fifteenth century trumpet music."

"Do you work tomorrow?"

"No."

"Neither do I. We'll go to your place after the Horn."

After I hung up, I realized I was heading for trouble. The evening as planned had only one logical conclusion. And if I didn't make love to her, or if I did and

it was like last time, that could be the end of everything. But how could I have avoided it?

Maybe we would both be out of NoPreg pills. Maybe we would stay up late and be too tired. Something might happen. Sandy, you deserve better than this.

I spent the afternoon at fencing class and then stopped by the Young Conservative Club for a little political talk. When I got home I didn't want to go near the violin so I turned on the reading machine and re-read the first half of *Don Quixote*. By then it was time to get ready for the evening. I spent a healthy fifteen minutes in the refresher unit and then, clean and perfumed, put on a fresh sweater and a brown evening poncho. A red beret was my final attempt to bolster my spirits.

We had dinner together on Market Street and I managed to make her laugh. It took an effort of will from me—I learned a lot in Mr. Goldstine's course in Yogi and Self-Discipline—but by the time we got to the theater Sandy seemed almost relaxed.

The play was pretty good but not for me. The hero was a great lover and all the girls in Moscow wanted him to bed them. He was everything I had wanted to be before I started love school. He was everything I was trying not to want to be.

We left the play and walked through town to the Horn. The quickest way led us along the edge of the Carnival. Sandy

pressed against me as the flashing lights and taped voices tickled our subconscious minds. Beside the giant Pinwheel a gang of swagger boys in old-fashioned tweed jackets watched us dreamily. A jet screamed among the stars, loaded with passengers and bound through the night for California or Moscow or some place.

Moscow. I would never be the guy in the play. I would never see the young bucks envy me or the slim young girls hungry after me. And maybe that was a childish dream but it was what I had always wanted and apparently I couldn't change.

I tried, I thought. But after what's bound to happen in her room, I can chalk up another failure.

"Let's hurry up," Sandy said. "I hate the Carnival."

"So do I. We're almost to the park."

In the park a spaceman passed us with a dark brunette leaning on his arm. He walked like he ruled Creation and the girl looked honored to be with him.

I hugged Sandy.

"You're nice," I said. "What a wife you'll make. I can just see you in the kitchen with the kids around you."

"Thank you."

But you could tell by her face and her voice that it didn't mean what it had meant once. She knew where I was. I was with the spaceman and the girl she'd never be.

Mr. Lockhammer says people weren't always as sensitive to each other's feelings as we are today. I sometimes think they were better off.

If I could have bedded a girl like Marilyn just once. Or been a spaceman or a great musician or a poet. Anything but one more hungry, unknown guy in the big, uncaring Universe.

The coffee house was crowded but we found a table for two and ordered. There were lots of people there I had to wave to but none of my close friends.

"I wonder where the gang is," I said.

"It's a little early. Why don't we order?"

"All right."

We ordered coffee and sat in silence. I like to watch the people in coffee houses. The bright clothes, the shifting colored lights, the talk and the smoke. A good coffee house is a stage and if you look at it right you can make it any good place in any time.

Reb came in and stopped by our table. He still looked groggy.

"Pleasure, Frenchy."

"Pleasure," I said. "Too bad about yesterday."

"We could have used you."

"I'm sorry. But I told you how I feel about showdowns."

"Yeah. Ever since you got hit."

I stiffened. My friend Reb. My comrade in arms. But he left before I could answer.

"He thinks I'm afraid," I said.

She touched my arm. "He's not the only one."

"He's just feeling bad because they lost. He'll get over it."

"Frenchy—"

Jim Strait came in with Marilyn Scott. She was wearing a red jacket with a black hood. They looked like the spaceman and his girl. I followed them as they walked to a table and only then did I notice all the Warriors were in the place.

I looked at Sandy. She was watching Jim and Marilyn.

"Look at the crowd around them," she said.

"The new hero. They'll have another hero next week."

Sandy was facing the door. I saw her raise her hand to wave and then lower it. I turned to see who had come in. Marge and Bart. I waved. They went to Reb's table like they hadn't seen me.

"They didn't even wave," I said. "Some friends I have."

"I want to go home, Frenchy."

"What?"

"I want to go home. I can't take this. I'm sorry."

"You can't take what?"

"Being snubbed."

She pressed the red button on the service panel and the serving cart began to weave through the crowd with our check.

"Please don't argue with me here," she said.

"I'll see you home."

"You don't have to."

Her cheeks were red and her eyes were shiny with the hint of tears.

"Does it matter to you that much?" I said, trying to speak softly.

She nodded.

"It shouldn't. What other people think shouldn't matter."

"I can't help it, Frenchy."

The cart stopped beside our table. Sandy picked up the check and fumbled for change, unable to see clearly through the tears.

"Wait a moment." I said.

"Why?"

"I want to think."

Now I knew what she wanted. She wanted all the things I was trying not to want. And how, being that kind of person, could she love a man with no friends and no status? She *couldn't* love me. To her, I was a guy who was taking second best because he couldn't have the best.

I looked at Jim Strait. I knew how to give Sandy what she wanted. But to do it I would have to lose the war I was fighting with myself.

I *wanted* to fight Jim. Did I have to let the tiger loose to make Sandy happy? To make Sandy mine?

Self, stop rationalizing. You are making up excuses so you can do what you want to do and shouldn't do. You do this and you'll never be sure what your motivations were.

"I have to go, Frenchy. Please let me go."

But could I let it end like this? At the Golden Horn, in the middle of an evening? I remembered how she had bubbled

with life once and all because of me.

My head hurt. I tried to go over it again. I wasn't supposed to showdown or compete because I had to learn how to love. I wanted to showdown and was likely to make up any reason to convince myself I should. But Sandy needed the prestige and status I had been trying not to seek.

There was nothing solid in it. It was all confused. The only solid thing was Sandy. Sandy and her needs. And the bright thing we could have between us—before it was too late.

She pulled herself away and started for the door.

To walk through the park, I thought. To walk through the park and have her look at me with a face full of love and pride. To make her laugh.

"Stay and watch," I said as I grabbed her.

She didn't turn around. "What are you doing?"

"Watch."

I started toward Strait's table. The old wild thing came alive. Oh, I'll bring you down, my boy. Your scalp will hang from my belt. But not just for me. To please my lady love.

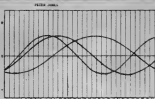
"Greetings, Jimmy-O."

"Pleasure, Frenchy. How's the violin?"

"Fine. Which Warriors survived yesterday's encounter?"

"Jerry, Joey and myself."

"How sweet. All your names begin with J. I'm the last survivor of the Golden Horn



JUNE 1 - 10 PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL... EXCELLENT DAYS... AN OUTSTANDING PERIOD OF HIGH GOOD DAYS... PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY YOU SHOULD BE AS YOUR BEST... CHASE AN EXTRA MILE, AND ENJOY YOURSELF IN EVERY RESPECT... ACCORDING TO YOUR CAPABILITIES... KNOW YOUR DAYS YOU CAN FROM YOUR LIFE AND TEST YOUR METTLE.

INTELLIGENCE: ON JUNE 1 - 10 ONLY... (CERTAIN YOU OUGHT BE THINKING... CAUTION)... YOUR REACTION COULD BE SLUGGISH TO A SOME... CHANCE.

ON JUNE 21 YOU WILL BE STRAINED INTELLECTUALLY BECAUSE THE SYSTEM CHANGED FROM LOW INTO HIGH... BE ALERT AND ENJOY THIS LONG PERIOD OF PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL... VIGOR... AND JUNE 22 - 24 YOU CAN ACHIEVE... (BETTER) THAN... WITH YOUR REACTION... (EMPOWERED) BY A NEW... (EXCELLENCE) FORCE.

JUNE 25 - 30 PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL... EXCELLENT... BUT FOR PHYSICALLY... ALL THIS IS A CRITICAL... DAY PHYSICALLY... (EMPOWERED) OR OVERCONFIDENCE... DRIVE WITH EXTRA CARE... AND THINK TWICE BEFORE YOU ACT.

INTELLIGENCE: YOU CAN RELY ON YOUR CLEAR THINKING... (CAUTION)... THAT... (BETTER) TO ACHIEVE.

JUNE 31 - 10 PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL... (YOUR) DAYS FOR... (CONCENTRATION)... (WRITING)... (COMING) ON THE... (FIELD) IN YOUR... (MIND)... (AND)... (FOLLOW)... (POSSIBLE)... (USE)... (YOUR)... (IMAGINATION)... YOU WILL BE... (SUFFERING) IN... (YOUR)... (ADDITION)... BECAUSE YOUR FEELINGS ARE STIMULATED.

INTELLIGENCE: YOUR CREATIVE ABILITY WILL BE... (EMPOWERED) BY YOUR... (FAVORABLE)... (INTELLECTUAL)... (CONDITION).

JUNE 31 PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL... (REMARK)... (A)... (BETTER)... (YOUR)... (AND)... (POSSIBLY)... (USE).



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EVERYBODY HAS UPS AND DOWNS

Everybody has cycles — everybody's cycles are different. The capacity to learn and to absorb seems to be highly regulated by INTERNAL LIVING CLOCKS starting the day you are born. These physiological changes are a part of our very bones and flesh. Dr. William Fliess at one time President of the German Medical Association, published in 1903 THE RHYTHM OF LIFE, FOUNDATIONS OF AN EXACT BIOLOGY... his discovery of a formula that traced a 23 and 28-day high and low period in man's physical and nervous system based on thousands of case histories. Professor Telscher of Innsbruck later discovered the 33-day cycle affecting the intellectual capabilities.

Today's Health News in February of 1972 said, "Scientists have found evidence that our biological clocks can be meaningful in medical treatment."

The official Tactical Air Command Magazine "ATTACK" in the March 1972 issue reported in an analysis of accidents that 67% of the pilots involved

had two or more Bio-Rhythm™ cycles in the minus portion.

A major chemical company testing the Bio-Rhythm™ cyclical theory in a pilot project covering 2 million man hours resulted in a 40% reduction of accidents in their plants.

Human errors can be reduced. Flight Safety Foundation reported in their September/October newsletter concerning this human factor side of accident investigation and causation. A transport company in Japan which operates a fleet of some 700 buses, taxis and a primary railroad has been applying the Bio-Rhythm™ Theory to their operation. The results? As quoted in the Flight Safety Foundation newsletter, "In the first year of application the accident rate decreased by one-third as against a steeply increasing trend in the country as a whole."

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SHEPHERD OF THE PLANETS

By ALAN MATTOX

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

*Renner had a purpose in life. And
the Purpose in Life had Renner.*

THE star ship came out of space drive for the last time, and made its final landing on a scrubby little planet that circled a small and lonely sun. It came to ground gently, with the cushion of a retarder field, on the side of the world where it was night. In the room that would have been known as the bridge on ships of other days, instrument lights glowed softly on Captain Renner's cropped white hair, and upon the planes of his lean,

strong face. Competent fingers touched controls here and there, seeking a response that he knew would not come. He had known this for long enough so that there was no longer any emotional impact in it for him. He shut off the control panel, and stood up.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "that's it. The fuel pack's gone!"

Beeson, the botanist, a rotund little man with a red, unsmiling face, squirmed in his chair.

"The engineers on Earth told

us it would last a lifetime," he pointed out.

"If we were just back on Earth," Thorne, the ship's doctor, said drily, "we could tell them that it doesn't. They could start calculating again."

"But what does it mean?" David asked. He was the youngest member of the crew, signed on as linguist, and librarian to the ship.

"Just that we're stuck here—where ever that is—for good!" Farrow said bitterly.

"You won't have to run engines anymore," Dr. Thorne commented, knowing that remark would irritate Farrow.

Farrow glared at him. His narrow cheekbones and shallow eyes were shadowed by the control room lights. He was good with the engines which were his special charge, but beyond that, he was limited in both sympathy and imagination.

Captain Renner looked from face to face.

"We were lucky to set down safely," he said to them all. "We might have been caught too far out for a landing. It is night now, and I am going to get some rest. Tomorrow we will see what kind of a world this is."

He left the control room, and went down the corridor toward his quarters. The others watched him go. None of them made a move to leave their seats.

"What about the fuel pack?" David asked.

"Just what he said," Farrow

answered him. It's exhausted. Done for! We can run auxiliary equipment for a long time to come, but no more star drive."

"So we just stay here until we're rescued," David said.

"A fine chance for that!" Farrow's voice grew bitter again. "Our captain has landed us out here on the rim of the galaxy where there won't be another ship for a hundred years!"

"I don't understand the man," Beeson said suddenly, looking around him belligerently. "What are we doing out here anyway?"

"Extended Exploration," said Thorne. "It's a form of being put out to pasture. Renner's too old for the Service, but he's still a strong and competent man. So they give him a ship, and a vague assignment, and let him do just about what he wants. There you have it."

He took a cigar from his pocket, and looked at it fondly.

"While they last, gentlemen," he said, holding it up. He snipped the end, and lit it carefully. His own hair had grown grey in the Service, and, in a way, the reason for his assignment to the ship was the same as Renner's.

"I think," he said slowly, "that Captain Renner is looking for something."

"But for what?" Beeson demanded. "He has taken us to every out-of-the-way, backward planet on the rim. And what happens? We land. We find the natives. We are kind to them. We teach them something, and leave them a few supplies. And

then Renner loses interest, and we go on!"

"Perhaps it is for something in himself," David offered.

"Perhaps he will find it here," Thorne murmured. "I'm going to bed."

He got up from his seat.

David stood up, and went over to one of the observation ports. He ran back the radiation screen. The sky outside was very black, and filled with alien stars. He could see absolutely nothing of the landscape about them because of the dark. It was a poor little planet. It hadn't even a moon.

In the morning they opened up the ship, and let down the landing ramps. It was a very old world that they set foot upon. Whatever mountains or hills it had ever had, had long ago been leveled by erosion, so that now there was only a vaguely undulating plain studded with smooth and rounded boulders. The soil underfoot was packed and barren, and there was no vegetation for as far as they could see.

But the climate seemed mild and pleasant, the air warm and dry, with a soft breeze blowing. It was probable that the breeze would be always with them. There were no mountains to interfere with its passage, or alter its gentle play.

Off to one side, a little stream ran crystal clear over rocks and gravel. Dr. Thorne got a sample bottle from the ship, and went over to it. He touched his fingers to the water, and then touched

them to his lips. Then he filled the sample bottle from the stream, and came back with it.

"It seems all right," he said. "I'll run an analysis of it, and let you know as soon as I can."

He took the bottle with him into the ship.

Beeson stood kicking at the ground with the toe of his boot. His head was lowered.

"What do you think of it?" Renner asked.

Beeson shrugged. He knelt down and felt of the earth with his hands. Then he got out a heavy bladed knife and hacked at it until he had pried out a few hard pieces. He stood up again with these in his hands. He tried to crumble them, but they would not crumble. They would only break into bits like sun dried brick.

"It's hard to tell," he said. "There seems to be absolutely no organic material here. I would say that nothing has grown here for a long, long time. Why, I don't know. The lab will tell us something."

Renner nodded.

For the rest of the day they went their separate ways; Renner to his cabin to make the entries that were needed when a flight was ended, even though that ending was not intentional; Beeson to prowling along the edge of the stream and pecking at the soil with a geologist's pick; and Farrow to his narrow little world of engines where he worked at getting ready the

traction machines and other equipment that would be needed.

David set out on a tour of exploration toward the furthestmost nests of boulders. It was there that he found the first signs of vegetation. In and around some of the larger groups of rocks, he found mosses and lichens growing. He collected specimens of them to take back with him. It was out there, far from the ship, that he saw the first animate life.

When he returned, it was growing toward evening. He found that the others had brought tables from the ship, and sleeping equipment, and set it up outside. Their own quarters would have been more comfortable, but the ship was always there for their protection, if they needed it, and they were tired of its confinement. It was a luxury to sleep outdoors, even under alien stars.

Someone had brought food from the synthesizer, and arranged it on a table. They were eating when he arrived.

He handed the specimens of moss and lichen to Captain Renner, who looked at them with interest, and then passed them on to Beeson for his study.

"Sir?" David said.

"What is it, David?" Captain Renner asked.

"I think there are natives here," David said. "I believe that I saw one."

Renner's eyes lit up with interest. He laid down his knife and fork.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"It was just a glimpse," David said, "of a hairy face peering around a rock. It looked like one of those pictures of a cave man one used to see in the old texts."

Renner stood up. He moved a little way away, and stood staring out into the growing dark, across the boulder studded plain.

"On a barren planet like this," he said, "they must lack so many things!"

"I'd swear he almost looks happy," Dr. Thorne whispered to the man next to him. It happened to be Farrow.

"Why shouldn't he be?" Farrow growled, his mouth full of food. "He's got him a planet to play with! That's what he's been aiming for—wait and see!"

The next few days passed swiftly. Dr. Thorne found the water from the little stream not only to be potable, but extremely pure.

Farrow got his machinery unloaded and ready to run. Among other things, there was a land vehicle on light caterpillar treads capable of running where there were no roads and carrying a load of several tons. And there was an out and out tractor with multiple attachments.

Beeson was busy in his laboratory working on samples from the soil.

David brought in the one new point that was of interest. He had been out hunting among the boulders again, and it was almost dark when he returned. He told Renner about it at the

supper table, with the others listening in.

"I think the natives eat the lichen," he said.

"I haven't seen much else they could eat," Beeson muttered.

"There's more of the lichen than you might think," David said, "if you know where to look for it. But, even at that, there isn't very much. The thing is, it looks like it's been cropped. It's never touched if the plants are small, or half grown, or very nearly ready. But just as soon as a patch is fully mature, it is stripped bare, and there never seems to be any of it dropped, or left behind, or wasted."

"If that's all they have to live on," Thorne said, "they have it pretty thin!"

The natives began to be seen nearer to the camp. At first there were just glimpses of them, a hairy face or head seen at the edge of a rock, or the sight of a stocky figure dashing from boulder to boulder. As they grew braver, they came out more into the open. They kept their distance, and would disappear into the rocks if anyone made a move toward them, but, if no attention was paid them, they moved about freely.

In particular, they would come, each evening, to stand in a ragged line near one of the nests of boulders. From there, they would watch the crewmen eat. There were never more than twelve or fifteen of them, a bandy legged lot, with thick, heavy torsos, and hairy heads.

It was on one of these occasions that Dr. Thorne happened to look up.

"Oh, oh!" he said. "Here it comes!"

Renner turned his head, and rose to his feet. The other men rose with him.

Three of the natives were coming toward the camp. They came along at a swinging trot, a sense of desperation and dedicated purpose in their manner. One ran slightly ahead. The other two followed behind him, shoulder to shoulder.

Farrow reached for a ray gun in a pile of equipment near him, and raised it.

"No weapons!" Captain Renner ordered sharply.

Farrow lowered his arm, but kept the gun in his hand.

The natives drew near enough for their faces to be seen. The leader was casting frightened glances from side to side and ahead of him as he came. The other two stared straight ahead, their faces rigid, their eyes blank with fear.

They came straight to the table. There they reached out suddenly, and caught up all the food that they could carry in their hands, and turned and fled with it in terror into the night.

Somebody sighed in relief.

"Poor devils!" Renner said. "They're hungry!"

There was a conference the following morning around one of the tables.

"We've been here long enough

to settle in," Renner said. "It's time we started in to do something for this planet." He looked toward Beeson. "How far have you gotten?" he asked.

Beeson was, as usual, brisk and direct.

"I can give you the essentials," he said. "I can't tell you the whole story. I don't know it. To be brief, the soil is highly nitrogen deficient, and completely lacking in humus. In a way, the two points tie in together." He looked about him sharply, and then went on. "The nitrates are easily leached from the soil. Without the bacteria that grow around certain roots to fix nitrogen and form new nitrates, the soil was soon depleted.

"As to the complete lack of organic material, I can hazard only a guess. Time, of course. But, back of that, probably the usual history of an overpopulation, and a depleted soil. At the end, perhaps they ate everything, leaves, stems and roots, and returned nothing to the earth."

"The nitrates are replaceable?" Renner asked.

Beeson nodded.

"The nitrates will have formed deposits," he said, "probably near ancient lakes or shallow seas. It shouldn't be too hard to find some."

Renner turned to Farrow.

"How about your department?" he asked.

"I take it we're thinking of farming," Farrow said. "I've got

equipment that will break up the soil for you. And I can throw a dam across the stream for water."

"There are seeds in the ship," Renner said, his eyes lighting with enthusiasm. "We'll start this planet all over again!"

"There's still one thing," Beeson reminded him drily. "Humus! Leaves, roots, organic material! Something to loosen up the soil, aerate it. Nothing will grow in a brick."

Renner stood up. He took a few slow paces, and then stood looking out at the groups of boulders studding the ancient plain.

"I see," he said. "And there's only one place to get it. We'll have to use the lichens and the mosses."

"There'll be trouble with the natives if you do," Thorne said.

Renner looked at him. He frowned thoughtfully.

"You'll be taking their only food," the doctor pointed out.

"We can feed them from the synthetizer," Renner answered. "We know that they will eat it."

"Why bother?" Farrow asked sourly.

Renner turned on him.

"Will the synthetizer handle it?" he asked.

"I guess so," Farrow grumbled. "For awhile, at least. But I don't see what good the natives are to us."

"If we take their food," Renner said, "we're going to feed them. At least until such time as the crops come in, and

they are able to feed themselves!"

"Are you building this planet for us, or for them?" Farrow demanded.

Renner turned away.

They put out cannisters of food for the natives that night. In the morning it was gone. Each evening, someone left food for them near their favorite nest of rocks. The natives took it in the dark, unseen.

Gradually, Captain Renner himself took over the feeding. He seemed to derive a personal satisfaction from it. Gradually, too, the natives began coming out into the open to receive it. Before long, they were waiting for him every evening as he brought them food.

The gathering of the lichen began. They picked it by hand, working singly or in pairs, searching out the rocks and hidden places where it grew. From time to time they would catch glimpses of the natives watching them from a distance. They were careful not to get close.

On one of these occasions, Captain Renner and David were working together.

"Do they have a language?" Captain Renner asked.

"Yes, sir," David answered. "I have heard them talking among themselves."

"Do you suppose you can learn it?" Renner asked. "Do you think you could get near enough to them to listen in?"

"I could try," David offered.

"Then do so," Renner said. "That's an assignment."

Thereafter David went out alone. He found that getting close to the natives was not too difficult. He tried to keep out of their sight, while still getting near enough to them to hear their voices. They were undoubtedly aware of his presence, but, with the feeding, they had lost their fear of the men, and did not seem to care.

Bit by bit he learned their language, starting from a few key roots and sounds. It was a job for which he had been trained.

Time passed rapidly, and the work went on. Captain Renner let his beard grow. It came out white and thick, and he did not bother to trim it. The others, too, became more careless in their dress, each man following his own particular whim. There was no longer need for a taut ship.

Farrow threw a dam across the little stream, and, while the water grew behind it, went on to breaking up the soil with his machines. Beeson searched for nitrate, and found it. He brought a load of it back, and this, together with the moss and lichen, was chopped into the soil. In the end, it was the lichen that was the limiting factor. There was only so much of it, so the size of the plot that they could prepare was small.

"But it's a start," Renner said. "That's all we can hope for this first year. This crop will furnish

more material to be chopped back into the soil. Year by year it will grow until the inhabitants here will have a new world to live in!"

"What do you expect to get out of it?" Farrow asked bitingly.

Renner's eyes glowed with an inner light.

Renner's beard grew with the passing months until it became a luxuriant thing. He let his hair go untrimmed too, so that, with his tall, spare figure, he took on a patriarchal look. And, with the passing months, there came that time which was to be spring for this planet. The first green blades of the new planting showed above the ground.

The natives noticed it with awe, and kept a respectful distance.

That evening, when it was time for the native's feeding, the men gathered about. Little by little the feeding had become a ritual, and they would often go out to watch it. It was always the same. Renner would step forward away from the others a little way, the load of food in his hands. The natives would come to stand before him in their ragged line, their leader a trifle to the front. There they would bow, and begin a chant that had become a part of the ritual with the passing time.

With the first green planting showing, there was a look of deep satisfaction in Renner's eyes as he stepped forward this night. His hair had grown quite long by now, and his white beard blew softly in the constant wind. There was a simple dignity about him as he stood there, his head erect, and looked upon the natives as his children.

The natives began their chant. It became louder.

"Tolava—" they said, and bowed.

As usual, Farrow was nettled.

"What does the man want anyway?" he asked out loud. "To be God?"

Renner could not help but hear him. He did not turn his head.

"David!" he said.

"Sir?" David asked, stepping forward.

"You understand their language now, don't you?" Renner asked.

"Yes, sir," David said.

"Then translate!" Renner ordered. "Out loud, please, so that that the others may hear!"

"Tolava—" the natives chanted, bowing.

"Tolava—our father," David said, following the chant. Suddenly he swallowed, and hesitated for a moment. Then he straightened himself, and went sturdily on. "Tolava—our father—who art from the heavens—give us—this day—our bread!"

THE END

(Cont. from page 76)

Irregulars. I think we should meet at once to end the battle."

"Three against one? Why don't you just shoot yourself and save us the effort?"

"Don't be so confident. Full power guns. In a dark room. Three against me."

He shook his head. "Full power guns are dangerous. You can get a concussion."

"It's my last showdown. Frenchy leaves in style."

"Sorry."

There was a dish of gooey Swedish sherbert on the table.

I picked it up and threw it in his face. He stood up snarling. An hour later they faced me on the showdown floor.

Just before the lights switched off, the spectators filed out. Sandy went last, after Marilyn. She stood in the door and looked at me like I was the next best thing to God. I blew her a kiss and drew a big I love you in the air. Timidly her lips formed three soundless words.

I laughed and turned on my gun. I'm Frenchy Wald, gentleman. What I love, I love well.

THE END

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THE FIRST INVADER

By PAUL DALLAS

If you happen to be on the scene when the ship of the first extraterrestrial lands on Earth, don't grab your gun and start firing. It may be only Joe Smith from Mars looking for the corner drug store.

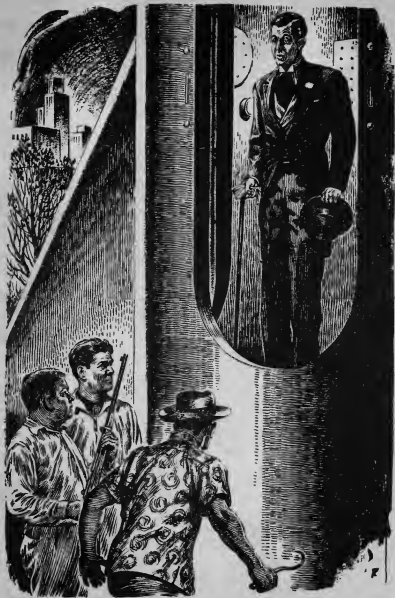
RADAR caught it first as an electrical disturbance. There was some speculation as to whether the equipment or the operator was at fault. The radarman who reported it came to regret having been so alert. Not merely his ability, but his sobriety were severely questioned. Luckily for him, before the ridicule of his companions and superiors could drive him to the drink of which he was accused, radarmen in various posts came to his rescue. They also saw it and reported it.

Something was approaching from far, far out in space. It could have been a meteorite, or a stray planetoid, but it wasn't. It was a vehicle of space, and it carried a live passenger.

Since the event was so well

reported and so accurately charted, a large crowd had assembled on Turk Hill Road before it landed and the local police, even with the help of a contingent of State Troopers, had difficulty in maintaining order. The military sent a representative and alerted certain key units—but it was thought best to treat the impending visit as a civilian and unofficial affair.

The landing itself, although interesting in many respects, was somewhat anticlimactic. The craft merely swooped in, losing speed as it neared the site. It hovered for a second and then settled neatly on the grass of Mr. Campbell's lawn. A spontaneous cheer rose from the crowd; they seemed about to surge forward, but apparently no one was anx-



ious to be the first to face the visitor. For five minutes nothing happened; an expectant silence lay heavily about the area and, except for some shuffling of nervous feet and the clearing of many dry throats, the crowd was still.

Then noises were heard within the craft. A scraping and pounding; a low grumbling, interspersed with a few mild exclamations, came through the door. Finally it opened, and standing in the doorway a man who looked extremely human, though oddly garbed, stared perspiringly at the throng. He took a step backward as if to disappear again within his craft, but he stood his ground and took a deep breath.

"What," he demanded, "is the meaning of this?"

No one was prepared to answer that question. In the confusion of silence which followed, the County Supervisor, Zeke Blakton, stepped to the front and, winning a rather surprising victory over his resisting stomachs, he bowed.

"Welcome," he said. "Welcome to our friend from space."

"Don't be ridiculous," the stranger snapped. "What province is this?"

"This is the United States of America," Supervisor Blakton answered proudly. "You see, sir, we don't have provinces here, exactly. There are states, counties, cities . . . but we don't call them provinces. I, myself, sir, am the Supervisor of the County of . . ."

"Will you stop this foolishness?" the visitor interrupted impatiently. "You know perfectly well that you are all under the Authority of Kastrat and this play-acting is contrary to the public good. Now be kind enough to explain this nonsense at once."

The sergeant in charge of the State Trooper detail decided to take over. He elbowed his way to a position just in front of Blakton.

"Listen, Mac," he said, the full authority of his uniform and badge and gun echoing in his voice, "let's just get something straight. You're a visitor here, and as long as you behave we'll get along just fine. But don't give me any of that Authority stuff, or I'll run you in so fast it'll make your head swim. So just keep in line."

The little man in the spaceship got very angry. He had been upset and irritable before, but now he was extremely angry with the ser-

geant. "I've had just about enough of this, you simple clown," he exploded. "Now you turn right around and skedaddle out of here or I'll stun you."

"Are you threatening me?" the sergeant growled.

"You bet your stupid life I'm threatening you," the visitor snapped back.

The sergeant shrugged elaborately and half-turned to the crowd. "You folks all heard him," he announced. "He is threatening a police officer in the proper performance of his duty. Okay, bub," he returned his attention to the stranger, "you're under arrest!" He unsnapped his holster and drew his revolver. "Now just step down out of that thing and come forward with your hands up, and nobody'll get hurt."

Supervisor Blakton was very unhappy at the turn of events; particularly so, since the play seemed to have been taken out of his hands. He laid a restraining hand on the sergeant's arm. "Let us not be hasty," he said in a low voice. "Let's try to reason with him. After all, he's new here, he probably doesn't understand."

The sergeant shook off the Supervisor's hand. "He threatened me," he answered

loudly, "and he's going to find out that it don't pay."

Watching this tense scene from the doorway of his craft, the visitor gradually relaxed, and suddenly threw back his head and roared with laughter. For a full minute he stood there, head thrown back, peals of uncontrollable laughter ringing out over the crowd. When his guffaws subsided enough to allow him to talk, he said, "Why, bless me, I believe you're serious."

"You're darn tootin' I'm serious," answered the non-plussed sergeant, taking a step forward, his gun trained on the stranger. "Now just step down out of there."

"I don't know if you people can appreciate this." The stranger's voice shook with repressed laughter. "But you look like characters out of a comic opera. This, this buffoon," he pointed at the scowling sergeant, "holding that . . . what do you call that thing? Oh, really, it's too much!" He giggled happily.

"This is a gun, buster," the police officer said. "And I'm warning you not to try anything funny."

"All right, my foolish friend," the visitor said, "I'll have to bring you up to date." He extended an arm till his

forefinger pointed directly at the sergeant's gun. A flash of light streaked from the tip of his finger to the weapon, and, with a grunt of alarm, the officer dropped the lump of molten metal he found he was holding. A gasp went up from the crowd, and Supervisor Blakton burrowed his way into the thick of it. He was a peaceable man. The three troopers who comprised the sergeant's detail went into action; deploying in a semi-circle around the spaceship, they advanced warily, their guns in their hands. Three quick flicks of the stranger's finger left them disarmed and shocked, staring at the remnants of their weapons.

For a moment nobody knew what to do, except the crowd, which edged backward away from the center of danger. Then the local police made their move. Five of them, and one part-time cop, crouched, drew their pistols and advanced. Before they could call on the stranger to surrender, they had joined their brother officers in a state of shock. None of them had been harmed, it was the blinding speed with which nine experienced policemen had been disarmed, and the complete destruction of their weapons, which had stupefied them.

Only Leroy Campbell, whose lawn was being littered with small lumps of metal, kept his head and thought clearly. While this was going on and guns were dropping like overripe apples, he crept unnoticed into his house and put in a call to State Trooper Headquarters. In a few whispered words, he made the situation fairly clear. The trooper on duty, a former lieutenant in the U. S. Army, relayed the news to the National Guard units in the area. Their response was creditable. Within minutes, a National Guard tank, of early World War II vintage, was rumbling along the highway. Troops followed in trucks.

The tank arrived to find the crowd standing at some distance from the ship, and the stranger back inside his craft, pouring over what appeared to be maps. The tank commander rolled his vehicle into position in front of the crowd and made a great show of aiming the .75mm gun at the invader. It swung this way and that, elevating and depressing the muzzle until it came to rest squarely on target. This was calculated to be a strong psychological approach. The commander did not want to shoot if any other

course were available. The hatch popped open and his head appeared, clad in helmet and very imposing.

"Hey, you!" he called out. "By the power invested in me during this present emergency, I call upon you to surrender in the name of the Governor of this State and the President of the United States." It didn't make too much sense but it sounded authoritative, which was the big point.

The stranger looked the tank over slowly, inspecting it with great interest. "I suppose there are more of you inside that tin contraption?" he inquired mildly.

"Well yes, there are," the commander admitted. "But that is entirely beside the point. I'm calling upon you to surrender."

"My goodness, what won't you people come up with next?" the stranger chuckled. "Are you going to call up the archers? Or maybe it will be the spearmen. Ah, that should be it! A phalanx of spearmen would make a brave sight."

"Look here," shouted the exasperated commander, "are you or are you not going to surrender?"

In answer, the visitor wagged his forefinger so that a

line from its tip played over the entire surface of the tank. Immediately, wisps of smoke began to curl up from the steel surface, and the crew—including the commander—scrambled pell mell out of the blistering hot vehicle. They watched open-mouthed as it settled into a puddle of fused metal.

The little band of law enforcement and military men had now grown to considerable proportions, but they lacked any idea of what to do. It was very difficult to evolve a plan of action against an enemy who could melt armor plate with a waggle of the finger. There was no telling what might ensue if the intruder should get really worked up and exert himself.

Through a sort of peristaltic effect within the crowd, Supervisor Blakton found himself inched forward and again deposited between them and the spaceship. There was nothing for him to do now but to address the stranger, who seemed rather amused at the consternation he was causing.

"My dear sir," Blakton began, licking his lips and smiling nervously, "what exactly do you want?"

"Ah, that's better. Much better," the stranger answered him. "Let us start at the

beginning. Is there present among you one, one will be all I need, just one intelligent person with whom I might have a few words?" He spoke pleasantly, but everyone within earshot caught the heavy sarcasm in his tone.

Nobody among the military, the law enforcement personnel, the politicians or the lookers-on claimed to be intelligent. Each turned to his neighbor as if to say, "You're intelligent; you speak to him." But none did, and for the moment things were stalemated, as the look of amusement on the stranger's face wore thinner, and so did his patience.

The indecision was settled by the arrival, with great clattering, of the truckloads of troops. The men clambered down and formed ranks. Military orders sounded as the soldiers fell in, and a hurried consultation ensued between the unhorsed tank commander and the colonel in charge of the newly-arrived contingent. Three bazooka squads were sent off to encircle the spaceship and the colonel, a major and two captains, all armed with carbines, advanced on the stranger. The colonel kept his weapon slung over his shoulder, but the other officers held theirs at

the hip, trained on the invader.

When they got to within a few yards of their quarry, the colonel and his party halted. "I'm Colonel Nichols," he remarked affably. "We thought we might be able to help."

"You'd help yourself a great deal, Colonel," the strange man answered without heat, "if you'd have your playmates put away their little toys."

"Can't do that, old man," the colonel replied, in the cultured tones of a reasonable gentleman. "After all, we're army, you know. But I'm sure we can settle this affair to everybody's satisfaction. Now if you'll just step over here a minute . . ."

"Colonel, I'm getting tired of this tomfoolery. Now tell your little friends to put those things away, or I shall have to remove them."

The officers tightened their grips on their weapons until the whiteness of their knuckles was easily seen. Hardly anyone took a breath, and the main body of troops seemed poised to move at the instant signal of hostile action. In which direction they would move was not completely clear.

The colonel spoke first.

"I'm afraid we can't be put in the position of laying down our arms, old man. Military honor and so forth. Fact is, I shall have to insist that you come down from your ship. If you don't mind, sir," he added, in an attempt to soften his order.

"You leave me no choice, colonel," the stranger replied, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "And now, so much for your weapons!" He raised an arm and pointed his finger. A gasp went up from the crowd, and the people shrank back. But nothing happened. A look of annoyance crossed the intruder's face, and he shook his hand and pointed again. Nothing happened. The stranger frowned in disgust and shook his hand violently, pounding it against his chest. Once more he straightened a forefinger and pointed dramatically—and once more all was as before. Nothing happened.

It suddenly dawned on the military, the police, and the rest of the crowd, that something had gone wrong with the man from outer space and that he had, for the moment at least, suffered a loss of power. Everyone surged forward at once, and within seconds the intruder found himself in the iron grip of the

military police, both arms locked securely behind his back. His soft struggles soon ceased and he became a panting, indignant, non-resisting prisoner.

In Washington, meanwhile, things were different.

Military Intelligence took over, clamped a shroud of secrecy about the whole affair and did not allow any questions to be asked of or answered for the prisoner. A committee appointed by the Secretary of Defense assembled to investigate him. Officers from all branches of the services joined with selected scientists for this venture. They gathered in a highly secret conference room at the Pentagon, and the invader was brought in. He was seated at a circular table, around which the investigators also took their places. His wrists were handcuffed to the arms of his chair, below table level, so that he could not point his devastating finger at the interrogators. Questions were fired at him from all points of the table.

"Who are you?"

"Where do you come from?"

"What did you come here for?"

But he remained silent and would not answer anything. Finally, when the first storm of questions had blown itself out and silence hovered momentarily, he spoke.

"I shall say nothing at all until you take these infernal things off my wrists. Really, gentlemen, this is no longer amusing. You behave like savages."

"Come, come, sir," General Sherman said. "You know very well you go around melting tanks and pistols and things with your finger. Do you think us fools, that we would allow you to have free movement with that finger?"

"Oh, it isn't my finger at all, as you'd have figured out if you had any sense at all," the stranger replied testily. "It's a simple sonray, and the blamed thing has gone out of whack anyhow. Now, if we're going to have anything further to say to each other, release my hands."

"Do you mean to say that you did those things with a machine?" Admiral Jacobs asked. "You don't have any personal power?"

"Personal power, my foot!" the prisoner snorted. "I told you, it's an ordinary sonray. It's in my breast pocket. My finger simply serves as a directional antenna."

A colonel of the Marines got up and walked over to the stranger. A brisk search revealed a slim black box in the prisoner's breast pocket. A fine wire trailed from the box, through a slit within the pocket, and rested against his bare chest. The colonel pulled it out and laid the device in the center of the table.

"That is the . . . the, er . . . sonray?" General Sherman asked.

"Well, what does it look like, a bow and arrow?" the prisoner returned angrily.

"Now, sir," General Sherman said, "that sort of attitude will get us nowhere. Please try to answer our questions civilly."

"I'll answer nothing at all until you release my hands," the invader said with finality. He hunched down in the chair as far as the manacles would allow him, and stared moodily at the tabletop.

A hurried buzz of half-whispered conversation ensued, regarding the advisability of freeing the prisoner's hands. The scientist present swung the decision.

General Sherman turned to the prisoner and said, "Will you give us your word that you are not in possession of any further weapons, and

that you will not attempt violence of any sort if we eliminate the handcuffs?"

The prisoner gave his word. But then a last-minute conference had to be held; certain of the officers present still objected. A scientist asked the deciding question, "What can we possibly hope to gain from this episode unless the man talks?" he asked. It was agreed to chance it. The manacles were removed.

The man from space rubbed his wrists and assumed a more comfortable position, as the slim black box was passed around the table and handled and examined by the committee members.

Dr. Felix Radjenski asked the first question. "How does it work?" he said.

The prisoner thought that one over for a moment. "Well," he answered finally, "you've got to be grounded, of course, and then you point a finger. Any finger would work, but I used this one." He held up a forefinger for all to see.

"Yes, yes, I'm aware of that," Dr. Radjenski forced a smile. "What I mean is, what is the functional theory? How is the machine constructed? What is the power source?"

"Why, I haven't the slight-

est idea," the invader said, looking innocently about the table. "I'm not a mechanic, gentlemen. If I were, I assure you I would have fixed the silly thing." Then he added in a lower voice, "And I wouldn't be here now."

"Let us try starting at the beginning," General Sherman said, rapping his pencil sharply on the table to silence several scientists who were anxious to pursue the questioning. "To begin with, where do you come from? Are you from this planet?"

The prisoner looked around the table with obvious distaste. "Oh, dear me, no!" he answered with a shudder. "At first, I thought I had stumbled onto a little pocket that had somehow defied progress—but now I'm sure this could never exist anywhere near home."

"It should be a simple matter to clear up," General Sherman smiled. "Can you tell us which planet you call home?"

"Naturally. Planet 5AL0-083."

"I beg your pardon." Dr. Keil broke into the questioning. "What does that mean? I'm an astronomer, you know," he added, by way of explaining his interest.

"Why it means, of course, that I live on Planet 5AL0-083," the invader said, as if talking to a child.

Dr. Keil cleared his throat. "Maybe we can do it differently. Your planet has a sun?"

"Yes. My planet has a sun."

"Which sun is it?" Dr. Keil asked gently. "That is to say, which star is your sun?"

The stranger turned to General Sherman. "Maybe I had better talk to you," he said. "My planet has only one sun. It comes up in the daytime, and the stars come out at night, when the sun is not there any more. Do you think you could explain that to him?" he asked, pointing to the astronomer.

"My good man," Dr. Keil sounded a bit huffy, "are you not aware that the sun is a star?"

"I'm not an astronomer," the man said simply.

General Sherman sighed and rapped for attention. "Let us go back to the beginning," he said. "You came here, from wherever you started, in that craft you arrived in, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then you must know something about the operation of the ship. Would

you be good enough to explain what you know about that."

"There's not much I can tell you about it, I'm afraid," the man said.

"Look, sir," the general said with a forced patience, "our engineers have been over your craft and can make nothing of it. They can't seem to locate any source of power. No fuel. Can you merely explain how it operates?"

The stranger brightened. "Oh, yes," he assured them. "First you call and have it delivered, giving a rough idea as to your destination. When it arrives, you pop in, dial your locale and away you go! They bill you later."

"Who," the general was still trying to be patient, "whom do you call?"

"The taxi company, of course. Whom did you think you would call, the butcher?"

The man's attitude did nothing to soothe the frayed tempers in the room.

"Are you calling that ship a taxi?" Dr. Radjenski asked incredulously.

"Certainly."

"And you mean you just went for a taxi ride across space?" General Sherman said.

"Not intentionally, I assure you," the prisoner answered. "I was just on my way to my

office. I called the taxi as I do almost every day. But this time something obviously went wrong. I wound up here."

"Incredible!" Admiral Jacobs breathed.

"From the weapon you carried, and the craft in which you arrived," Dr. Keil said, "I gather your planet is further along the way, scientifically, than we are."

"Oh my, yes," the stranger said fervently. "Why, seeing the way you people operate is like opening a book on ancient history. Although I'm not much of an expert on that," he added.

"Can you tell us about life on your planet. Everyday life, I mean," Dr. Radjenski asked. "How you live, what sort of equipment is used, things like that."

For the next several hours, the invader, who said his name was Rellek, described life on Planet 5AL0083. From his story it was evident that scientifically his home planet was far into the future. What completely defeated the men at the conference was that Rellek could describe the *effect* of many machines and devices, but could not begin to explain *how* they worked. He was apparently a man of some means and, mostly as

a hobby, ran a small stamp-trading business. He was very upset at the effect his disappearance would have on his friends and associates at home—but he didn't have the slightest idea of how to attempt to return. Neither the military nor the scientific minds in the conference room could help him there, because he was unable to give them even enough information to start making a plan.

It was General Sherman who made the motion to adjourn. "Gentlemen," he said, "I believe we have gained all the information it is possible for us to obtain at this time, and I suggest we adjourn for the day and confer again tomorrow. In the meantime, if anyone present evolves an idea of how we had best proceed, we will take it up at our next meeting. Mr. Rellek, I am sure I speak for my colleagues when I tell you that it has been a distinct pleasure meeting you."

"Thank you, General," Rellek replied, getting to his feet, "my pleasure, I'm sure. Now if you can direct me to a hotel, I'll get a little rest, which I need rather badly. You do have hotels?"

"Yes, we have hotels," the general answered, averting

his eyes momentarily. "But you see, I'm afraid you're still in custody. You will be held in the U. S. Marshal's detention cell until your case has been disposed of."

"I'll be held where?" Rellek quivered in indignation. This had gone *too far*.

"I'm afraid there's nothing I can do about it," General Sherman said.

"You'd just better do something," Rellek shouted, knowing full well that his threat was utterly empty. "What charge can you make against me, eh?"

The general looked across the table to the Marine colonel, who stood up, cleared his throat and read off a long list of crimes which included trespassing, destruction of Government property, resisting arrest, littering property, and threatening an officer of the law. The colonel was prepared to read on, but General Sherman silenced him. "There, you see?" he said to the prisoner. "If you are convicted of these charges, you'll be shuttling back and forth between civil and military prisons for some two hundred and fifty years. Now, that isn't to say you'll be prosecuted on all counts—but for the moment, you had better go along with the Marshal.

We'll send for you when we need you."

"It's an outrage," Rellek cried, alternately pounding the table and shaking his fist. "I won't go. You can't make me."

But, at a signal from the general, the door opened and a marshal and two husky deputies entered the room and took the man from space into custody. He did go. It turned out they could make him.

Rellek sat on the hard bench in his cell, staring disconsolately at the floor. How could he have gotten into this mess, he wondered? It was unbelievable that in this modern age such things could happen. In his entire life, the only violence with which he had been familiar was what he had read. Nobody resorted to actual physical force any more, he mused, shaking his head. He had read about such things as armed police and armies—but to think that things like that actually existed at this late date was fantastic. And here these people were really using antiques like pistols and long guns. Why, at home the only arms, if you could call them that, were the sonray and the repeller belt. But these were for

emergency use and though almost everyone wore them, they were rarely, if ever, used as weapons.

Suddenly he jumped to his feet and slapped his forehead smartly with his hand. Then, abruptly, he clasped both hands to his middle, checking. Yes, it was there. The thing had been part of his garb for so long without use that he had forgotten completely about it. But it was there, all right. He had the repeller belt with him. He checked to make sure no guard was watching him, and then sat down to figure out how to work the device. If he remembered correctly, it was the giant buckle in the center. He pressed it tightly with the palm of his hand. It depressed slightly. He walked to the center of his cell and pressed it again; then he twisted it. It turned smoothly, a half-turn to the right. Now then, he thought, if the thing was in working order, he should be surrounded by a field a foot and a half thick, which would repel anything.

He approached the bars of his cell gingerly to test the belt; nothing seemed different. As he came within range, the bars bulged gently outward. He was satisfied. He stepped back. Retreating to

the center of the cell once again, he called the guard.

A burly man answered his shouts by peering into the cell. "What do you want?"

"Do you know who I am?" Rellek said.

"Yeah." The answer was an uninterested grunt.

"Well, then," Rellek continued, "I must warn you not to try to stop me or to take any action against me, because I am leaving this place now."

"Listen, buddy," the guard said, with a great show of patience, "I've heard who you are, or who you *say* you are, so just be a good boy and take a nap or something. You're not goin' anywheres just now."

"I'm afraid I'll have to insist," Rellek replied firmly, "so please step back. I'm not quite sure how the thing works, and I wouldn't want anyone to be hurt."

The guard's eyes narrowed and he slipped a black leather billy from a rear trouser pocket. He slapped it menacingly in the palm of his hand, and a hard note replaced the patience in his voice. He stepped close to the bars.

"Get your butt on that bench," he growled, "and keep it there. If you know

what's good for you, you won't let me hear a peep out of you."

Rellek drew a deep breath, gathering his resolve. He held it for a moment and then expelled it. "Stand back," he said, "I'm coming through."

He advanced toward the bars, taking slow, deliberate steps. The guard tensed, then his eyes bulged, as he stared at the unlikely sight of the steel bars bending slowly outwards. The closer Rellek approached them, the farther away from him they bent, until with a loud screech of tortured metal they snapped in the center and bent fully open.

Rellek stepped through, carefully picking his way over the twisted steel, as the guard backed away. At last the guard's nerve broke and he turned, running wildly down the corridor. He managed to get his whistle between his lips, and as he rounded the corner he was emitting shrill alarms with what breath he could spare.

Rellek glanced after the retreating man and smiled with satisfaction. So far, so good, he thought. He patted his belt buckle affectionately and proceeded down the hall. It took a bit of getting used

to, he found. If he strayed too close to a wall, it creaked ominously as it strained away from his protective screen. Wandering down several corridors, on the way to the street, he came upon more than one locked door. These crashed to the floor as he neared them, enabling him to walk through with no trouble.

Noticing that a group of men were following him cautiously, a discreet distance in his rear, he turned and addressed them. "Is any of you gentlemen in charge of this . . . this dungeon?" he asked.

"N-no, sir," one of the uniformed men answered hastily. "We're guards, sir; we just work here."

"Ah, too bad," Rellek murmured. "I would have liked to talk to the keeper of this zoo. Imagine, putting men behind bars." He snorted and was about to move off, when a commotion occurred at the rear of the group of guards and a man, whose figure ran to flesh and was swathed in civilian clothes, pushed his way to the front. He faced Rellek in silence. He looked about him, taking in the damage that had been wrought, and then he whispered to one of the guards, who answered into his ear. As the guard

ended his story, the fat man's eyes widened and he nudged his way partly back into the crowd, so that one or two men almost blocked him from Rellek's view.

"Now you look here," he yelled down to the man from space, "I'm the warden of this station, and I'm ordering you back to your cell at once. I'm warning you that I consider this an attempt to escape from custody."

"No," Rellek said. "Really?"

"Yes," the warden replied. "And unless you return immediately, I shall be forced to take action."

Rellek waved his hand airily. "I would like nothing better than to remain and bandy words with you, warden," he said; "there are, in fact, quite a few things I would like to talk to you about. But I'm afraid my time is limited. Good-bye." He turned to leave, but paused at a shout from the warden. He faced the official, to find that the beefy man had drawn a pistol and was pointing it, none too steadily, in his direction.

"Halt! Halt, or I'll shoot!" The warden's words carried conviction, but the voice quavered.

"Now you put that thing down," Rellek cried, pointing

at the pistol. He had been faced with these antiquated weapons before, and they infuriated him. The warden gasped and dropped the pistol. Then, when nothing happened, he stooped and picked it up, scolding one of his men for jostling it out of his hand.

"That pointing business won't work any more," he called to Rellek. "I happen to know that. So you'd just better give up peacefully."

Rellek stared at him in cold disdain. He lifted an eyebrow. "I won't have to point, warden," he said. "I'm leaving. If you want to shoot, go ahead."

He turned again and proceeded down the hall towards the front door. The warden's voice came spiralling down the corridor after him. It was almost a falsetto, it was so frenzied. "Now halt, I said. Halt, do you hear me? Halt or I'll shoot, I said. All right, then, you are forcing me to shoot!"

Rellek looked over his shoulder just as the boom of the pistol reverberated in the closed area, bouncing off the walls. There was a shoosh of air and a sharp ping. A flattened slug fell to the floor some eighteen inches from Rellek.

The men at the other end

of the hall, who had been ready to rush forward to capture the fallen body of the fleeing prisoner, recoiled in horror. The warden was left standing alone a few feet in front of them. His reason was shattered by the impact of panic, and he stood there, grasping the pistol in both hands and pulling the trigger as fast as he could work his finger. Five shots crashed from the weapon; those bullets which did not bury themselves wildly in the wall, were flattened against Rellek's shield. The warden continued to pull the trigger until his senses returned and the dry metallic click of the hammer falling on an empty chamber brought him back to reality. Then he saw that he was alone, a foolish figure firing an empty gun. The guards behind him had vanished at the opening of his wild fusillade, and Rellek had simply walked out the door.

It was dark outside. And cool, and pleasant. It was also, for Rellek, a time of indecision. His vague wish was to return to his ship, in a desperate vain hope that somehow it could be made to work again and return him to reality. The main obstacle to this course lay in the fact that

he did not have the slightest idea where his ship was. The maze of streets, flanked by old-fashioned massive stone buildings, was too much for him.

As he wandered, trying to resolve his mental confusion, he was thankful that the streets were almost deserted. The few pedestrians who were about minded their own business, unaware that they shared the sidewalk with the man from space.

A sudden series of sharp, tack-hammer sounds startled him, and he whirled to see a woman running along the sidewalk toward him. It was Miss Bentley, the secretary of the Interrogation Board. She ran, waving her handbag at him and calling, "Oh, Mr. Rellek, Mr. Rellek, wait!"

Rellek turned to face her, rather glad to have someone to talk to. Her short legs pumped in strides which strained the material of her skirt at every step; she was smiling as she crashed into his invisible shield and landed flat on her back on the sidewalk. The smile vanished abruptly. She heaved to a sitting position, her hat tilted at a ridiculous angle over one eye. Horrified at the accident he had caused, Rellek bent over her, stretching out a

hand to help her up. As he bent, the field bent with him and promptly knocked her flat again.

"Get away from me, you big . . . you big oaf!" Miss Bentley sputtered.

Rellek stepped back and muttered apologies. "Oh, dear," he said, "I'm so sorry. I had no idea. I didn't mean to . . ."

"All right, all right," Miss Bentley said, sitting up again. "Only don't come near me again until you shut that thing off."

"Certainly, Miss Bentley," Rellek said, surprised that he had remembered her name. He fumbled with his buckle and turned off the shield. Then he helped her to her feet. It took a minute to rearrange her hair and hat and unruffle the feathers of her disposition. When she had returned to normal again, she was full of concern for the strange little man.

"Oh, Mr. Rellek," she clucked, "you're in trouble. You've done some perfectly awful things."

"I haven't really done anything, Miss Bentley," Rellek said plaintively. "I didn't want to come here in the first place, and I most certainly don't want to stay. I just

want to go home," he ended, looking very crestfallen.

"Why of course you do, you poor dear," she agreed sympathetically. "We must seem very peculiar to you. Almost like savages, I suppose."

"Complete savages," he breathed fervently and then, seeing the hurt in her eyes, he added gallantly, "at least the men act like savages. You're not married, Miss Bentley? But then, how foolish of me, you'd be called Mrs. Bentley if you were a married woman."

"You *are* a surprising soul, indeed," she said. "You seem to know so much about our ways—and yet you seem so helpless to understand some of the things we do."

"I'm afraid you're right, Miss Bentley; but you see, certain aspects of your social system are remarkably like ours on 5AL0083, while others . . ." he raised his eyebrows and shook his head, ". . . positively medieval."

"What a pity you couldn't get to know us as we really are," she sighed. "I'm sure you would like us. But I suppose you can't, because if they catch you now, there's no telling what they'd do. They were very angry back at the station, but they're afraid to come after you. They're mo-

bilizing the military, you know."

"Oh, dear," Rellek said, alarm creeping into his voice. "I've no idea what I shall do."

"That belt thing of yours seems to take care of you pretty well," Miss Bentley said, eyeing the buckle curiously. "At least it worked beautifully at the station, I've heard."

"Yes, but heaven knows how long it will go on working. I have no faith at all in mechanical gadgets. They go wrong so often." His eyes narrowed suddenly, and he asked, "But how did you know it was my belt that I was using?"

She gave a little laugh. "Oh, that was easy. I knew it had to be something you turned on—and when I asked you to turn it off, you did something with your buckle. See?"

"My goodness, Miss Bentley," Rellek said, smiling, "it seems that even on your planet a great deal of the common sense lies within the female brain."

"You're sweet. But now what on Earth are you going to do?"

He scratched his head. "I don't know, Miss Bentley, I really don't know. If I could at least find my taxi, I'd see

if I could get it going, or something. But I don't even know where it is."

"A taxi?" she asked in bewilderment. "Why, we can always get a taxi. But where would you go?"

"No, no! I mean my vehicle. The one I came in."

She brightened. "Oh, that's no problem," she said, taking him by the arm. "I can take you to that. It's lying in the open on a big flat truck. It's parked in the lot about six blocks from here."

"Will there be anybody guarding it?" Rellek asked nervously.

"No. You see, they're assembling a team of scientists to go over the thing and examine it . . . but there's nobody been assigned to guard it, I'm sure. Except the attendant, of course, and he wouldn't stop me. Or anyone with me," she added.

"Will you take me to it, then?" he asked eagerly.

She patted his hand. "Of course," she said. They started off together.

Everything went as Miss Bentley had predicted. Her familiar face, her responsible position, got them through the gate; once inside, they became lost to view in the quiet pandemonium of massed

vehicles. They found the large truck, and Rellek stared in joy at his shiny taxi.

"Oh, this is wonderful, Miss Bentley. I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't even think of it. I'd be happy to do anything I could to help you. You're such a nice man." Her eyelids fluttered in embarrassment. "But I haven't really helped you at all, have I? I mean the thing, the taxi, is still on the fritz."

"Fritz?"

"I mean it doesn't work, does it?"

He looked at the craft for a long time, as if trying to will it to work. "It'll just have to go," he said. "I can't bear to think of what will happen if it doesn't." He shuddered. "But what about you? If I am

lucky enough to get away, what will they do to you?"

"Oh, tush," she said, waving a dainty hand. "What can they do to me?"

"Well, helping me to escape, and all. They don't seem to take my case lightly."

"Oh, they're just a bunch of overgrown boys." She smiled. "They wouldn't have the slightest idea of what to do without me. Who else could understand what their mumbling means? And who would get them their soda pills and aspirin before they

even knew they needed them? Why, I can tell by General Sherman's voice when he's about to have an attack of indigestion."

"You are an understanding woman," Rellek said, squeezing her hand. "I . . . I don't know how to say this, but . . . I mean, if I can get this thing going, would you . . . that is to say, do you suppose you'd like to try . . ."

She shook her head and smiled sweetly into his eyes. "No, dear, sweet Mr. Rellek." Her eyes were moist. "I would love to, really, but it wouldn't work, because my place is here. I know that. You have to leave, and my prayers will go with you. I'll think of you always."

Rellek leaned toward her and kissed her gently on the cheek. "Good-bye, my dear one," he said. "I shall never forget you."

Then he turned, and climbed up onto the truck and into the ship. He stumbled twice because his eyes were clouded with mist. He settled himself in the seat and leaned toward the door to say something final to Miss Bentley. Before he could speak he became aware of a sudden commotion at the entrance to the lot, and he could see a large group of

soldiers entering and making their way, with flashing lights, toward his truck. Miss Bentley waved at him to close the door and he lost no time in following her advice. The hatch swung to and insulated him from the growing clamor outside. He could see nothing, nor did he wish to.

Frantically, he pushed and pulled every lever and button and switch in the compartment—but nothing worked. He prodded each rivet and bump he could find, hopelessly, then gave himself over to despair and sat numbly staring at the floor. Realizing that he had to do something, and that the belt seemed to be his only refuge, he prepared to switch it on and face his tormentors. As he looked down, his eye was caught by the flickering needle of the speed indicator, and he gaped. He was traveling at incredible speed! He felt nothing. Was this, he wondered, some trick of the fiends outside? Or was he, in fact, actually moving? And if so, where to?

His thoughts were dispelled by the crackling of the loudspeaker in the compartment. "Mr. Rellek?" a voice said. "Mr. Rellek, can you hear me? Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right,"

he shouted. "Who in blazes are you?"

"This is Mr. Santini of the Excelsior Taxi Service, sir. I'm right alongside you. I'm going to couple on and come into your ship."

"Wait a minute!" Rellek wasn't going to be duped if he could help it. "If you're Santini, what's your call number?"

"3203KM, Mr. Rellek—you know that." Santini's voice was puzzled.

"Come on in," Rellek said wearily as he relaxed. He sagged back in his seat for a minute gathering strength, and when Santini finally came through the hatch he stood up.

"Mr. Santini," he said, "this is an outrage. Never in my life have I ever heard of such a thing. Believe me, when we get back home, things will be stirred up."

"I'm terribly sorry, sir. We've never had anything like this happen before. Apparently your receiver must have picked up some stray wave and followed it instead of the prescribed course. It had us worried."

"It had *you* worried!" Rellek steamed. "Have you any idea of what it did to me?"

"I'm sure it must have been dreadful, sir," Santini said

calmly. "But you didn't do much to help, did you, sir?"

"Me help? How could I possibly help?"

"Why, the emergency button, sir. Here, the red one, on the ceiling," Santini pointed. "If you had pushed that, we could have gotten a line on you. We searched on every wavelength known, but we were helpless, you see, until you pushed that button. We're pulling you in."

Rellek was abashed. It came back to him now; the briefing all new customers received in the operation of the taxis. But it had been so long ago, and he hadn't paid too close attention, anyhow. Gadgets always confused him.

"Oh, I see," he said.

Now that it was over, his anger evaporated, and he thought fondly back to Miss Bentley. What a sweet woman! If women like that lived back home, he would not remain a bachelor much longer, he ruminated.

"I wonder, Mr. Santini," Rellek said, "have you ever heard of a planet called Earth?"

"Why, of course, sir," Santini answered easily. "We got that in third grade, I think."

"We did? I didn't remember."

"Oh, sure. That's what our planet was called in ancient times. That's good old 5AL0-083."

THE END



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THE GREAT BEER PLAGUE

By LES COLLINS

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

Well, you take a stubborn geologist, a beautiful girl, a fault in space-time, and what do you expect to get? Oil?

RECIPE for madness: the basic ingredient is a young man — Jerry Leader — endowed with intelligence and empathy, trained in the earth sciences.

Mix well with: a flaw in the space-time continuum, little green men, and the girl Jerry wanted to marry, Irene Murray.

Bake for: one hot August week in southern California.

Result: Jerry about to lose his job and his girl, ruin the economy of a state, disrupt the national defense program, serve time in Leavenworth, and lose several million dollars he didn't have.

For a week now, every single oil well in California had been producing nothing but beer, ale, and stout. The young geologist — with a gene pattern like none other on earth — honestly felt the mess wasn't his fault. That was

because up to a few days ago, Jerry was lacking normal aggression.

And now he had only 15 minutes left in which to set matters straight. His shirt soaked with perspiration from the Friday-afternoon Bakersfield heat, Jerry stood alone on the drilling platform and stared at the well — *his* well — that was supposed to have proved his ability. Then he looked at the group watching him, and despite the heat, shivered.

They were still there: the innocuously ominous government agents, the admiral, Jerry's boss, Jerry's party chief, and Irene. Quite a collection. The young man wished he was sure of this desperation, last-ditch try. The smell of stale beer annoyed him. Why, Jerry wondered, couldn't this well have completed as an expensive-type brew?

As a geologist, Jerry couldn't be expected to understand the mechanics of ruptured continuua. Nor could he know the beer issuing so frothily from California wells *was* his fault. He didn't even realize the little green men were not green.

But Jerry Leader did recall the monstrous chain of events leading to his appearance—a sort of command performance—at this well where the trouble started, where his hopes went down in a spray of alcoholic foam.

It had been that evening last week. Irene asked him to dinner, and he couldn't refuse her. Unfortunately, she was George Murray's daughter. Murray not only was the oil company's executive vice-president, but also he preferred another suitor. Cozy situation.

During the meal, Jerry complimented his boss on certain new-land acquisitions. According to geological and geophysical surveys, the new lands were worthless—and everyone in the company knew it. Murray was not happy with the reminder of his mistake.

After Jerry left, Murray grumbled, "I thought Leader was a good geologist. Doesn't he read the reports?"

"Dad," Irene's eyes glinted amusement, "you believed the land good."

"That was before, not after. Hasn't that fool sense enough to use hindsight?"

"If Jerry still thinks the land

is good, it is. He's a fine geologist."

Her father sarcastically asked, "Are you capable of judging?"

"I've heard it; they say Jerry is natural-born to geology, that he has a one-in-a-million instinct, that he makes love to sub-surface strata.

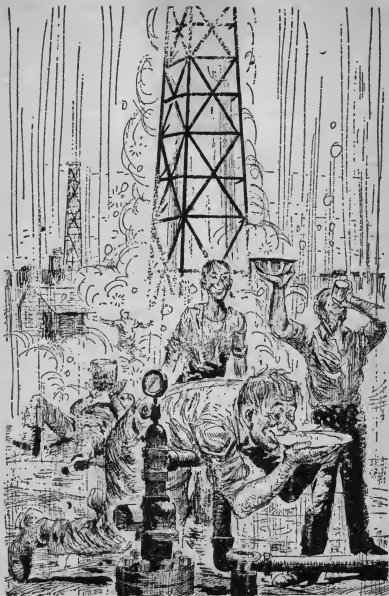
"Speaking of love," Murray remained unimpressed, "you haven't picked that nonentity?"

"No-o-o." But her reply was drawn out, not positive.

"Good, because I think Leader won't be with us very long." When he spoke the words, Murray didn't notice the set of his daughter's lips or the way her expression changed from amusement to stubbornness and perhaps a little determination.

Glumly, Jerry dialed long distance from Bakersfield and waited for the call to Irene. Murray had assigned him to Ray Summers' party; Jerry became a lone Christian on a vast Colosseum floor crowded with lions. Summers was competent enough to hold his job and wise enough to chew up any possible claimants to it. Worse, Summers was Murray's fair-haired selection for Irene. Worse worse, he knew Jerry was his competition. Worstest worse, Jerry was now behind the 8-ball that covered the X that marked the spot.

When Irene answered, Jerry said, "I'll have to break our date tonight." Frustrated, he unthinkingly continued in jargon, "Have to sit on a well."



"To keep it from being a gusher?"

He despaired on understanding her; she'd been associated with petroleum geology long enough to know what he meant. That's all he ever got, wells. Why didn't they give him exploratory work? Then he'd show what he knew!

"Jerry?"

"Sorry, I was thinking. It means I have to log the well, to be there from 24 to 36 hours, keeping a record of important strata drilled through."

"You should have called me sooner."

"Couldn't, 'Rene. Had to study the area. One mistake and I'm—"

Intuitively suspicious, she interrupted, "Did my dad give you a 'real chance'? Are you assigned to Summers?" Jerry's silence was confirmation; Irene grew furious. "Dad ran all over you. Why didn't you tell him to 'go take a—"

Hastily, Jerry cut in. "May I call you when I get back to town?"

And then she grew more angry: "Say you'll call; don't ask!"

The geologist was hurt, not knowing Irene's anger was directed at her father. Mentally, he vowed to find some way of proving his worth. This firmly set the Murray-Irene-Summers-Jerry interaction; consequently, a major industry, California, and the Federal Government descended with malice aforethought—simply because Jerry

brought in a well that pumped beer.

He wasn't to know this until each of the segments were in place. After the call, he drove to the assigned area. Summers' face shimmered and danced in the heat crinkles off the car's hood. Summers, patronizing, deliberately humiliating him . . . Keep the drilling going, Leader, until you hit Vaqueros shales; there's production in the Vedder sands . . . What idiot wouldn't know that, Summers? . . . Let's get it straight right now, Leader: I'm party chief. Do nothing until you've checked with me . . . And another thing: no beer, Leader—

At the memory of the words, Jerry downshifted viciously. He still couldn't believe Summers' pronounced sentence of doom in the heat. Beer goes with geologists as traditionally as matzoh-ball soup with Passover. Reaching the well, Jerry changed from angry young man to geological computer. He checked the ditch as a matter of course. Robot-like, his eye recognized formations in the mass. Shales, limestones, a few foraminifera—*Pulvinulinella*, he correctly guessed. Nothing exciting so far.

Then he went to the Barium Mud Corporation trailer. These jobs always fascinated him: they were like indescribable Hollywoodana, with flashing neons for gas tests, black lights for oil, electronic recorders (modified Brown type), and—of course—bunks for the geolo-

gists. Briefly, he thought about applying for work with Barium, then abandoned the idea.

He found time to kid the two Barium geologists, Art and Mac, and to make the invariable jokes about the core-house. But when he got there, he was again serious. The core-house was a temporary shack in which an entire record of well-cores was kept: samples, carefully labeled, in the correct stratigraphic sequence. These proved his first approximation—nothing important had been hit—was correct.

Outside, he watched the driller working in a sun already too hot. Jerry'd be missing beer before the day was out—

"Mister!" Art's head was sticking out the trailer door. "Mister, watcha doing? Some of that there geology work?"

Smiling, Jerry replied with a universally recognized sign of approbrium, and sat down in what little shade there was.

Several hours later, it had grown even hotter, and the drill bit was still chewing into Zemorrian-stage rocks. Jerry, too, had grown hotter, still chewing on recent events. He resented the beer-ban most of all. Several times, in defiance, he conjured up a non-emptying, ice-cold bottle of beer. Now, in an orgy of masochistic, delicious torture, he was about to imagine how good it would taste.

"Breakthrough!"

The shout brought him to his feet, and he raced toward the

drilling rig. The barium men spilled from the trailer; the three met a few paces from the well.

"Drill dropped suddenly," the driller explained. "Must have hit another sand."

"Give me 20 feet of core," Jerry said, then turned to the others. "We're offsetting Union Oil's Fee 87 well. What was its completion depth?"

"Less than this," answered Art. "You must be due."

Mac commented grimly, "Or else you've got a dry hole."

Finally, the driller began laying out the core in 3-foot lengths. Cylindrical, hot, it had been torn from the earth two miles below them. The Barium men had the black light ready; Jerry, again a machine, needed but one glance. The dingy brown rock fluoresced a beautiful green: it meant oil, lots of oil.

Jerry squinted in thought. "Wonder what the drift was. If only I knew for sure—"

"Hey!" Mac interjected, "don't do any more to the well. Summers will tear you to pieces."

Jerry ignored him, still thinking deeply.

"Raw hamburger," said Art, "he's been eating raw—"

"Give me as much counter-angle as you can," the young geologist said to the driller, "and drill another 50 feet." This well had the earmarks of a big producer. Here was the chance to show Irene and her father. Unknowingly, Jerry did—he would soon hit the continuum flaw.

The driller, startled, began to speak, shrugged, went back to work.

Jerry Leader, the emotional Jerry, knew the significance of the shrug; alone, he'd made the decision that would result in victory or defeat. It was the moment he'd been trained for; in a few seconds, he'd called on all his knowledge and experience.

If the drilling went past the thickness of oil-bearing sand and if water then flooded in, the project was a complete loss. No man can risk a half-million worth of well without qualms, especially when he can play it safe.

Perspiration gathered on his brow; rivulets trickled down around his eyebrows to his cheeks. Time did not slow for him—it ceased to exist. Literally ceased, he was to discover later, but aliens are aliens are little green men, and *they* weren't about to tell him.

Finally, the Barium guys were saying he had a terrific well, congratulations, what a lucky stiff! Jerry ignored them, for he was surprised by strange thoughts he had; seemed almost spoken. When Jerry had faux-pas'd about the newly acquired lands, Murray implied the company would sell the oil rights cheaply. If these thoughts were correct, he could get the land. And though the thoughts had never been so strong, Jerry realized they were what he'd been calling his instinct.

He was almost right.

THE GREAT BEER PLAGUE

Summers was phoned the news and arrived later; Art and Mac had insisted on a celebration and split their cache, in the portable icebox, with Jerry. He was feeling very good indeed.

"What's all this nonsense, Leader?" Summers demanded. Then he saw the empty beer cans. "You'd better explain those!" he roared his best executive roar, "I told you not to drink beer, Leader, in the interests of The Team. You're always breaking orders. The company cannot endure creeping individualism."

When he'd run down, Jerry blinked at him, suddenly conscious Summers was only a man. "My well isn't nonsense. There are some new samples waiting your inspection. Why the devil don't you check them instead of yelling."

Art, looking at Mac, silently formed the words "Raw hamburger!"

The party chief snapped: "I did, and the gunk doesn't look like oil. Prove it."

They went to the fresh cores, Summers triumphant, Jerry a little shaken. He examined a specimen. No oil-shows—none! Definitely none.

Summers checked. "Doesn't even smell like oil." He sniffed the rock again, then touched his tongue to it. Wildly, he shouted, "Leader, you drunken idiot! This gag will get you canned."

"What's the matter?"

"Matter?" snarled the party

chief, fists balled menacingly, "This isn't oil. It's *beer!*"

The petroleum world in California habitually reads a daily trade paper, the Munger Oilogram. Munger gives accurate, timely information—as much as the various companies will release—on the progress of wells being drilled. The Monday morning following Jerry's fiasco, the Oil Industry read of his well. It read of his "beer showings," and laughed at the joke in the staid publication. Depending on proximity to Jerry, segments of the industry laughed, chuckled, smiled, and—in a few cases—acted with sobriety.

Jerry alone took it seriously; he couldn't understand what happened, but he knew it wasn't an elaborate practical joke.

Summers didn't take the beer well seriously, but he treated it in a grave manner: his rival was exactly where he wanted him. Jerry sweated out the week-end, with stern orders to be in Murray's Los Angeles office Monday afternoon. The young man would be fired.

He wasn't, but only because Murray couldn't be reached. The VP was in conference.

At 11 A.M., Standard Oil's 882-28B, always a heavy producer, began pumping a clear, cold, light-gravity beer with no percentage of waste—the head was left in the well. Oil-field workers came from all over, volunteering. Standard ordered the well shut-in, pending further de-

velopments. In the industry, this is known as "cogitating."

That same afternoon, Ohio Oil's Tulare Fee 46 was completed. Somebody misjudged the mud column, and the well completed as a blowout, a gusher. All over the Valley, spectators watched a great yellow stream climb 100 feet up, with a white, bubbly froth formed at the zenith. The froth then dispersed as minute droplets that drifted slowly in the direction of Buena Vista Lake. Pelicans there were later observed acting in a most peculiar fashion. Three WCTU members were arrested for drunken driving, unfortunate victims of the fallout.

The same strangeness occurred all over California. From the old fields of Los Angeles, through the hot areas in Monterey County, to the Rio Vista gas field near Sacramento, the wells produced beer.

Beer from the gas fields, so light it almost wasn't a liquid; varicolored beer, ranging from yellow to light brown, produced in the northern San Joaquin Valley; green beer, green in color and taste, from the Los Angeles Basin; and all of this beer was as cold as though it had been in a refrigerator.

There were exceptions. Tidewater's Hill 15 gave forth a thick, heavy, dark-brown stout that no one wanted to try. Trico's 71-12 pumped 92 barrels of weird-tasting ale.

By Tuesday morning, the entire Oil Industry was saddled

with two types of headache: that common to the field workers—who'd enjoyed getting theirs—and the anxiety type common to the professionals in the offices. Laughter no longer: try to understand a phenomenon with no rational explanation.

Summers' headache was parochial. Having returned to his apartment to sulk, he was unaware of developments and couldn't understand why Murray refused to see him.

Jerry had his, too. He'd closeted himself with books to study the problem and didn't know it was statewide. Feeling guilty that he had in some way caused the beer well—and he had—he began pouring over his texts, going back to such basics as "Shaft Sinking Under Difficult Conditions" and "Miocene Stratigraphy of California."

That day's Munger carried the usual number of wells; however, all data about them were contained in the single word "cogitating." One of the typists on the Munger staff broke under the strain of repetition.

Each oil company guards knowledge with a jealous efficiency that would make the FBI turn green. Before any information can be released, 13 wheels must initial it, having ascertained that it was previously published in a government geological bulletin.

Thus, for example, when the Munger reporter interviewed Shell's two scouts, Merier and

Klouse, he found these gentlemen tight-lipped. So much so, all they would say was, "Cogitating." The scouts had been told not to speak on pain of being boiled in beer.

The news did not reach the outside world. Around the fields, naturally, there were rumors, but no one was willing to loose a completely fantastic story or be the instigator of a riot.

However, though the news wasn't in the public domain, it did reach ears not commonly associated with petroleum. Several friendly tavern owners cancelled upcoming beer deliveries. Distributors couldn't believe that normally heavy consumption would suddenly cease; tactful investigations revealed the terrible truth. Within hours, every national and local brewer had quite accurate reports.

Shortly thereafter, the TV networks heard rumors that many favorite perennial reruns, the fights, and the late late movies would no longer be sponsored by beer. This caused an agonizing reappraisal of television in general.

Hollywood, almost in the midst of oil fields, quite typically got the news from New York via Milwaukee. The motion-picture industry, realizing TV's plight, suddenly began planning many more of the same old pictures. It became a fight between motion pictures and television, a scramble for material. Thus, three mediocre writers sold their first screen plays—and attributed

success to talent rather than Jerry Leader. The writers hadn't the faintest idea of Jerry's existence; even if they had, they wouldn't have given him credit.

British intelligence reported movement of several Russian divisions to the south, and Turkey and the NATO nations were alerted. Interestingly enough, the Russian troops stopped short of the border, encamping at the Baku oil fields.

An Arabian potentate, being wooed by a Russian commission, took a hurried trip to his wells. An alert American newsman reported that the potentate looked eagerly at the product he was pumping, then sighed and said dolefully, "Oil . . . nothing but oil."

On Wednesday, Munger suspended publication for the first time since 1919. The industry was too busy cogitating to read the trade paper.

The heads of the leading oil companies met late Wednesday afternoon. Wofingtown of Standard called the conference and, between nervous and hurried gulps of coffee, forthrightly broke the no-longer fantastic news. Moreover, he knew the others, too, were getting only beer.

Michell, Union Oil, dropped his miltown into his coffee when he heard that; Westin of Richfield dropped his coffee into his lap. The others relaxed; now they could be honest and all work together for a solution.

Hours later, they had no solution; when Honolulu Oil's representative, Hansing, suggested the one thing they *could* do was get drunk on beer, he was nearly stoned to death with tranquilizers.

Very, very early Thursday morning, they decided to call in the government—obviously a desperation move. To their surprise, they found the government was trying to see them at the same moment.

Admiral Block had arrived from Washington the evening before and spent his time unsuccessfully searching for these very men. Now he entered the room, his face black with anger, his manner precise, abrupt.

"The. Elk. Hills. Oil. Field," he said, punctuating each word, "in United. States. Naval. Petroleum. Reserve. Number. One, is, producing. ale. *Ale*, gentlemen, and this is the U. S. Navy, not—God forbid!—the British. The Navy is aware that California wells are pumping beer and products in the beer family. Don't you realize National Security is threatened? Why have you stopped producing oil?"

They stared at him, open-mouthed. The Admiral held up a hand. "Is Mr. Murray present?"

Murray acknowledged.

"Good. This began with you."

"Imposs—" Murray started to shout, then saw the Admiral's face. It was not the Navy Way to shout at an Admiral. "I mean, I don't have any such knowledge."

"The ONI traced the first oc-

currence to a well of yours drilled near Bakersfield."

Murray thought for an instant, then leapt to his feet. "Leader! Son of a—Leader!"

"Leader? What leader?"

"Jerry Leader, one of my geologists. He was on that well."

The Admiral snorted. "Bring your Leader to me. The Navy must have its reserves." The officer took on a look of cunning. "Perhaps he's working for the atomics faction? Or—God forbid!—the Army?"

However, they couldn't find Jerry anywhere.

Confidently, the Admiral called ONI for an assist. By mid-morning, the President was contacted, and he assigned Army and Air Force intelligences the job. Late Thursday, the FBI went into action. Despite the Admiral's positive statement, Murray didn't believe Jerry was—God forbid!—an enemy agent. He felt sure of that much.

Finally permitted to go home, worn out after 36 sleepless hours, Murray mumbled the whole story to Irene when she questioned him. On Friday, Irene produced Jerry.

Friday morning, Admiral Block sat glumly in the corner of the room, receiving reports that Jerry could not be found. The others were more lively, discussing possibilities. They faced the contingency that oil was no longer available. Perhaps there wasn't any more. It would mean, of course, that the California oil

industry would have to convert into a beer industry.

They didn't know that the old beer industry had organized and come out of its corner fighting for life. The brewers were preparing a complaint, to be given to the FTC. The charges were restraint of trade, misleading and false advertising, formation of trusts, and adultery. Unknowing, the oil men were unworried—at least about legal aspects—and continued their line of thought.

"We could," said Wofingtown, "re-educate through advertising. Tremendous campaign. In the East, we could go to red, white, and blue, Esso beer cans."

Michell nodded soberly. "And Phillips 66 certainly could put across the idea that this was the 66th blend tried."

Hansing added. "It might work at that. Imagine, all over the nation, billboards with such slogans as 'The Most Powerful Beer You Can Drink' or 'We Have Cleaner Beer Rooms.'"

"That's my province!" snapped Wofingtown of Standard.

"Wait a minute, gentlemen," interrupted Westin. "We can't ignore the present beer industry. What about all the people who'd be thrown out of work? Can't upset the economy."

Murray was passed a note: Summers was still waiting for him outside. He ignored it, listened with continued interest. Finally, he saw a solution to the problem. "I have it. We could take all the beer people in, and

make them TV announcers for the fights or baseball. After all, now we'll have to start sponsoring a great many TV shows."

They congratulated him. And had his statement reached the outside world, the writers would have lost their sales while cursing Jerry's name, the movies and TV would have gone back to being as bad as ever, the beer industry would have dropped its complaint, and things would have settled back to normal. American beer would be the best in the world because it would be brewed by Nature herself.

The Admiral arose. "Now that you have saved the economy, what in hell are you going to do about the security? You seem to forget: we still need oil."

They glowered at this governmental interference; however, there was logic to what the man said.

Murray received another note: Irene wanted him urgently. He couldn't be disturbed. Another note: Irene threatened not to tell him where Jerry was. Murray was out of the conference room like a shot, into the outer office. There, Irene, Jerry, and Summers were all in a violent argument.

"Leader, where have you been?" he shouted. It quieted the arguing three; it did more. Admiral Block, hearing the stentorian roar, came out, followed by the others. Block took command.

"Which of the services brought

you here? ONI?" he asked hopefully.

"He was at the well, where you brains would never think to look," said Irene. "He was being a good geologist, trying to—"

Jerry interrupted. "Please Irene! I'll answer the Admiral." He said it quietly, in a tone she'd never heard. Irene shut her mouth with a snap.

Summers began: "I've been trying to see you all week, Mr. Murray—" And then he saw Jerry's expression and stopped talking.

"Miss Murray found me," Jerry finally said. "I was at the well, hoping to get some clue to this business. I'd just found out that the trouble was statewide. I had no idea of that."

"What, may I ask, were you doing till then?"

"Studying, trying to understand what had happened at my own well."

The Admiral vented a naval snort. "Studying—when we need action!"

Jerry looked at him evenly. "There's no need for sarcasm, Admiral."

Block turned red, and they braced themselves for the explosion. Jerry continued to look at him. And Block said, "Maybe you're right, Leader."

Jerry ignored the others' startled expressions, continued, "Yes, studying and thinking. Beer flowing from oil wells is not, strictly speaking, a geological problem. It requires unconven-

tional thinking and I am better equipped than most of you."

"That's for sure," interjected Murray, sarcastically.

Jerry nodded. "I've begun along the proper lines."

Block looked hopeful. "You have an answer?"

"Just a start. The idea is so oddball, I first rejected it. I don't now, if for no other reason than its simplicity. Has anyone considered that the occurrence of beer is not natural? Some agency must be responsible."

The Admiral waved a hand. "We're investigating the possibility of sabotage—"

"That isn't what I mean," said Jerry, "but don't ask what I *do* mean. There's an idea skirting around inside . . ."

"Unfortunately, Leader, the government can't wait for you to develop crackpot ideas. Come up with something in the next hour, or you'll be in Leavenworth faster than you know. There are laws against hurting government property."

"But *I* didn't do this . . . one hour? That's not enough—"

They sensed his confusion, the loss of the dominance he'd exerted a few moments before. Summers began insisting Jerry be fired. Irene looked at him strangely, pitying him, and it was galling.

And Murray: "There's nothing to recommend you, Leader. You have your notice. I should have fired you last week, when you began talking about the new land in such glowing terms."

Suddenly Jerry snapped his fingers. There was a broad grin on his face. "I'm fired? And you don't like that land?"

"You're fired, and for two cents, I'd sell . . . if I could find an idiot to buy."

"Here's your idiot," Jerry grinned even more broadly. "All rights for five thousand? I'd be more reasonable, but it's all I have."

"Agreed! Verbal contract, in the presence of witnesses!"

Block said, "You've made a bad bargain, Leader. You won't use that land for many years."

Jerry shook his head. "I can if you'll extend the limit to include travel time."

"Travel time? To where?"

"The well. I have your answer. Care to come along?"

Now, glancing at the group, Jerry saw the confusion on Murray's face, the smugness on Summers', the skepticism on Block's, the worry on Irene's, and innocent blankness on the agents'.

Heat waves reflected off the rig's metallic structure; the misty glare of the Valley in summer surrounded the well. In the background, seemingly at random, crowded oil fields thrust derricks into the air as though civilization had gone mad with a multipurposed Cleopatra's Needle fetish.

The Barium trailer was gone; Art and Mac had left a sign, neatly but simply lettered "Raw Hamburger." Jerry grinned,

then sobered. It might be his last grin for some time.

The rig was not operating. The geologist nervously backed away, and sat down beside the driller, sprawled out in the shade. "Hot, isn't it?" Jerry asked.

"Yeah." They both ignored the others.

"You're being paid to sit here?"

"And with no work to do," the driller nodded happily. "When it gets too hot, I go over there"—he pointed to a completed, producing well a quarter of a mile away—"and refresh myself. It's ice-cold, too." He burped a lusty testimonial.

"Well, the vacation is over. Let's get to work." Jerry stood up.

"Heat got you?"

"Nope. Run a rat-tail down through the mud packing to the bottom."

The driller just stared at him. "I got orders not to—"

"I'm countermanding. Get busy!"

It was that quiet tone—and the driller went to work.

Finally finished, he called, "Now what?"

The geologist pointed to the other well. "Go refresh yourself." After the driller left, Jerry climbed onto the platform, and stared down at the well. He was more than nervous; he was risking everything on a two-mile hole in the ground, just as he'd done a few days before.

Standing motionless with

churning insides wouldn't help. Either it worked or it didn't. "I don't know if the method is right," Jerry thought, still staring, "but you must be there."

He waited. There was no sign, no reply, only defeat. "The shorter, happy life of Jerry Leader," the geologist thought bitterly. "I must be batty—"

you aren't, jerryY. we're here; we've always beeN.

Words in his head, he whirled back. "I don't understand!"

don't shout-thinK! atrocious mannerS. nevertheless, you've an instincT. where did you get iT?"

"You've been helping me? Why me? I'm not as good as I thought, am I?"

not so many questions at once, pleasE. we helped in the beginning; now you've developed enough to go it alone—you are as good as you thoughtT. however, any human brain has the capability for finding oiL. when you develop the sense properly, all you do is go to the right spot and think about iT. your brain will find it, right propeR.

"as for helping, we didn't exactly pick yoU: we were stuck with yoU. because of your gene pattern, you're the only human we've ever been able to contacT.

Jerry tried to stifle the thought, Little Green Men!, by asking, "Who are you?"

little green meN. you deserved thaT—can't you avoid thinking in trite phraseS? we are so tired of the label. we're people, of a sort, living across the galaxY.

when you counterangled the drilling, you hit a flaw in the continuum. now we can reach you physically.

"I was right! You're responsible for the beer."

certainly. weren't you wishing for it all the time? we're easily as nice as you, jerry, so we gave it to you. besides, look at the fun it caused.

The young man wondered what a mental giggle thought like—the last statement seemed to be accompanied by one. Instead, he accused, "You planted the thoughts about the land; I remember having them strongly right after we brought in this well.

of course.

A smug thought, that; but Jerry was too anxious to finish the job. "I can't thank you enough; now turn off the beer and give us back the oil. It's rather important."

not so fast. in due time, we'll decide.

"Decide? Nothing to decide—there's only one answer!"

you're shout-thinking again. haven't you learned anything?

"Plenty!" Jerry continued in the same tone of mind. "Indiscriminate niceness is as harmful as anything else not done in moderation."

A new thought joined in: this character is improving. he got any more?

"Sure: be nice only to those who know how to respond. 'Illegitimus non carborundum' is a way of saying not to let 'em walk

all over you. I tried that—and you should see how they're snapping into line."

we have seen it; just wanted to be sure you knew what you'd done.

"Then, as long as the fun is over, return the oil!"

he's more than improved; he's ready.

correct: a parting thought, jerry. don't swing the other way and turn mean. balance niceness with aggression.

"Parting thought? I'd like to know you personally. Is there some way I can reach you?"

certainly there is, and earth will learn it someday, but not from us. we may be nice—this time it was definitely a mental grin—but we're not that nice!

"I hate to see you go; you've been with me for so long."

we'll check the kids every so often . . . if there are any. irene is wondering about you this very moment, and summer is there. get moving!

"Right!" Jerry spun back to the group, stopped, and returned to the well. "What about the oil?" But there was no answer. And when he climbed from the rig, the agents were waiting to march him to Admiral Block with no stops on the way.

"You don't realize it, Leader, but you're mentally ill. You stared at the well 15 minutes, doing nothing, hardly moving."

"True, but I did what I had to."

"Doing what?"

"Talking to—" Jerry broke off abruptly, apprehensively.

"To yourself? Or maybe the well?" Block shook his head. "That's what I mean, Leader."

Here it was, then. Could he be insane? Nevertheless, he had to go through with it, no matter what. Jerry swallowed the large geode that formed in his throat. And precisely at that moment, he recovered his earlier confidence, plunged ahead. "The oil will flow, Admiral." Mentally, he added, "If those cockeyed purple-people eaters come through!"

right, jerry! the oil's being returned—you just won it. but how did you know we are purple?

"When is it coming?" the Admiral demanded.

"Soon!" Jerry matched his commanding tones, then called to the girl, "'Rene, come here."

She approached, flanked by Summers and her father. Timidly—for they'd worked on her—Irene asked, "Yes, Jerry?"

"Listen, if I'm crazy, it's like a fox. Shortly, I'll be in the oil business because your father kindly fired me and sold that land. Only proves that management should listen to its good technical help, at least occasionally. That's the first thing I wanted to tell you."

"There's more?"

He nodded. "I think you're lovely. Will you marry me?"

"I—I don't know, Jerry."

He sighed. "I do, but I guess I'll have to convince you." He did.

Murray said agitatedly, "Will someone stop that nut?"

Irene broke away, looked at her father. "It's too bad," she said dreamily, "that all men aren't nuts like this. Meet your son-in-law, Dad!"

Admiral Block said, "I hate to interrupt this celebration, but the United States Navy is still waiting."

Jerry frowned. "Can't understand what's taking them so long."

Murray questioned, "Them? Who?"

"Shouldn't that be 'they who?'" Jerry asked innocently.

"Heaven forbid!" Block shouted in exasperation, then shook his head, "He's hopeless—take him away."

With a roar that might have been associated with a detonated shell, the uncapped well erupted, blessed the forthcoming Union by spewing good, black, Standard oil all over.

Thus it was that Jerry Leader—intelligent, empathetic geologist—flawed the continuum, ended the little-green-man myth, and became the owner of a thriving oil business and father of twins.

Who had—God forbid!—gene patterns just like Jerry's.

THE END

(Continued from page 6)

ting them in uniforms to do a battle scene, or even to buying up the services of the Yugoslavian army for a similar purpose. It's quite another matter, however, to take these same extras and expect them to realistically portray citizens in some super-Utopia of the far future or enact the roles of denizens of another planet.

Miniatures, mock-ups and technical trickery can assist in the "special effects" department—but in the last analysis, it's the *people* on the screen who count. And here is where the movie-makers run into their time, space and cost problems.

Or, rather, run away from them. As a result, we get a succession of dreary so-called "science fiction" films in which the technical effects can be quite dazzling, but the *people* consist of a limited number of actors of limited ability. You've seen them time and again—the man who's a "scientist" by virtue of the fact that he wears a white smock; the crewcut hero and his crew in the "space outfits" with military insignia, and the inevitable Galactic Council.

THE Galactic Council, for the benefit of those of you who came in late and are just settling down with your popcorn, consists of three or five men in a low-

budget picture or seven men in a high-budget picture; when the hero and his buddies land on this new *papier-mâché* planet, they are conducted to the Council Chamber where these characters sit behind a bare table against a scrim-curtain backdrop. Even in the big, super-colossal "A" film, five of the members of the Council are just elderly extras in white wigs, crepe-hair beards and shapeless robes which bear a suspicious resemblance to maternity-gowns. During this obligatory scene they sit there but never open their mouths—if they did, it would raise the budget. A sixth member is considerably younger; he sits at the far left, and one look at his heavily-accentuated dark eyebrows and scowl tells us he's the villain. The seventh member sits in the middle (you see, with three or five on the Council, he can *still* sit in the middle) and *he* is the Head of the Council, has most of the dialogue, and also happens to be the father of that beautiful blonde chick in the leotard who is going to come in during the scene, have eyes for the hero, and take him off to "conduct" him through the cardboard caverns and other wonders of this Strange New World . . .

All right, so it's easy to poke fun. All the easier when we, as an audience are constantly and painfully reminded of the fact

that most science fiction movies set in distant futures or on distant stars can offer appeasement to our sense of wonder only in a series of miniatures—but give us nothing but chintz, crepe hair and leotards as accoutrement for the supposedly strange super-beings which inhabit these realms of enchantment.

But this is the very crux of the movie-makers' problems. Good science-fiction, as opposed to fantasy, must carry with it an illusion of *realism*. The settings, the mechanical devices, the special effects often succeed to a greater or lesser degree. But the better the job is done in this area, the worse the characters look, by sheer contrast. One would literally have to create a new world in order to make these people convincing, individualistic, arresting. We can and do believe in the characters in *The Hustler* or *Room At The Top*, because we are familiar with the *milieu* against which they move. But the space-suit boys and the leotard-and-robos aliens immediately reduce most science fiction films to the level of space-opera; even the plaster-of-Paris "monsters" are more credible.

To properly and effectively mount such a film requires more space and time than the average film-maker can buy.

WHEN we come to the problem of television, the same considerations apply with even greater stringency.

Consider the facts. The average half-hour TV show is shot in just 2½ or 3 days. A one-hour show is filmed in 5 days. Budgets are limited. There is no time for any elaborate pre- or post-production in the form of intricate technical effects. Visually, the results are confined to the compass of a 21-inch picture tube; it's hard to handle mass action or "awesome" vistas.

As a result, science fiction on television is largely confined to stories of borderline parapsychology, and tends to veer into fantasy. There have been "space" series, but the theme is generally limited to variations on *With Uncle Sam On The Moon*.

And like it or no, this is where the situation seems to rest at the moment. Hollywood owns properties like *Brave New World* but can't "lick the story-line"—except in terms of the same old Council of Elders and blondes in tights. There are producers, directors, writers, even actors, with ambitions and inclinations directed towards doing "real" science fiction movies. But first they must conquer space and time . . .

BOB BLOCH

A GREAT NIGHT IN THE HEAVENS

By

PAUL W. FAIRMAN

*Don't you know when you're well
off? Lilla did . . .*

WHEN John Nard told the girls that this year the family would drive to Observatory Plateau for the annual Clearing they gave forth with a joint shriek of delight and danced around the dinner table. Lilla especially, because she had never seen a Clearing. Lilla was nine, four years older than Tanny, who danced also but didn't really understand what a Clearing meant. Lilla had learned in school and the thought of seeing one put her into raptures.

Father had always wanted to take them but every year something had come up—one of the children ill, the harvest shaping up so that it had to be taken in before it spoiled, Mother busy with the conditioning and storing for winter; always something, but this year the crops were a little late and Father said

they could make it—go with the group from the Area and call it a holiday.

There were only four accessible places on the whole planet from which the great annual Clearing could be seen. The one closest to the Central Area in which the family lived was a day's drive away. That made two days and a night for the whole trip—not too much of a hardship, really, for the pleasure of seeing a Clearing. This was Mother's view of the matter and so she was delighted too.

Lilla and Tanny were sternly enjoined to go right to sleep that night because the trip would start early the next morning and they'd get little rest until after the return. And they tried, but it was awfully hard.

Lilla was especially grateful to God in her prayers before bed

— grateful that things had worked out so that she could see one of His great wonders, perhaps His greatest, and promised to be a very good girl in exchange for the privilege. She fell asleep quickly then.

Both girls were wide awake far earlier than usual the next morning, filled to the brim with tingling happiness as dawn crept down out of the eternal gray of the sky; the gray that made their lives here possible, Father had told them gravely; guarding them from the withering heat of a sun that would have fried them but for the clouds. They'd asked what a sun was and Father had explained; a fire in the sky; a star, whatever that was, made of burning gases around which planets always circled.

But none of that mattered now, as the cavalcade got on its way; seven families all off on the same wonderful holiday. And as Father let in the controls and the ejected air spurts lifted the jetmobile off the ground, Lilla thanked God again that they were actually on their way. It was wonderful, skimming along a foot above the level prairie with the breeze whipping your hair.

And there was Jan Harter to amuse the girls. Lilla was glad when his mother asked if Jan could ride with them because the seven Harter children were too much for their old jetcar. Jan was fourteen, and knew almost everything but you could

never be sure if he was joking or serious. But he was always fun.

For instance, while they were skimming along, he said, "Do you know that on Earth all people had to travel on were narrow cement strips they called roads?"

Earth was the planet everybody had come from hundreds of years ago—or at least where all the ancestors had come from to live on Cerka, the planet that was now home.

"But why did they have to have cement strips?" Lilla asked.

"To travel on. Their cars didn't have jets, only round wheels that rolled along the cement."

Tanny, who was very smart for her age thought this was funny. She laughed. "Then they could only go one place—where the roads went."

"And back again," Jan said wisely and Tanny almost fell out of the car from laughing.

But then, along toward evening, the plateau came in sight and in no time at all the cars were skimming up its slope.

There were many other people on the plateau. Everybody in the Area, it seemed, had come to the Clearing this year.

Rumor got around of course—as it always did—that perhaps the Clearing would not take place this year. This frightened Lilla and she went to Father to ask. He touseled her hair and said it would take place on schedule; that it was an astronomical certainty, a phenomenon

of the planet and could be predicted as accurately as an eclipse.

Lilla made a mental note to ask sometime what an eclipse was but now there was too much fun and excitement, with dusk turning into night and everyone waiting in groups for the great events—the Clearing.

Then it came — magically. There the heavy gray darkness was, up above, standing over and around everything as it always did. But as Lilla waited, quivering all over, the Clearing began. Although you couldn't see them for the darkness, you knew the clouds were rolling away because the darkness itself changed — became blacker, more velvety, more alive. Then, the annual miracle that brought a concerted gasp of wonder from the people.

A *living sky*! A heaven filled with a glowing brilliance that tightened Lilla's throat until she could hardly breathe from the sheer ecstasy of seeing it. Millions and millions of twinkling lights, some golden, some red, some blue, a dome of sheer magnificence. A revealing of what the heavens were truly like out there beyond the protecting cloud banks of Cerka.

For two solid hours, Lilla

stood spellbound, unaware of time or the people around her; quivering from the beauty of the mighty spectacle.

And then, on sure cosmic schedule, it vanished as it had appeared, the cloud banks forming again; to protect Cerka as always from the searing heat of its too-close sun, and allow life to exist on the planet's surface.

On the way home again, Jan Harter was his normal self; talking as usual, but not funny this time. He said, "On earth the clouds only come once in a while. Everybody there can see the stars every night of the year."

Lilla had been saying a little prayer of gratitude to God and Jan's words caught her attention. *Every day of the year?*

A small twinge of jealousy caught at her but she drove it away. What Jan said was impossible, of course. He was just talking.

A Clearing every night of the year? Stars to look up at during all the dark hours? Impossible. It would be too wonderful. Seeing them but once a year was a gift beyond words; a sure sign of God's love and as she thanked Him in her prayer, her gratitude welled up into tears.

Tears of thankfulness for the lucky little girl she was.

THE END

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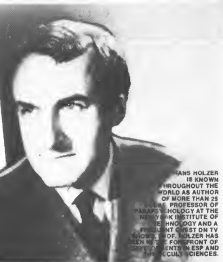
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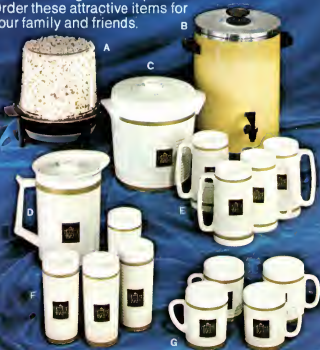
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